

# LUISS



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Chair of Gender Politics

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel  
as Representation of Women in Media

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# 1. History of Comic Books and Feminism

## 1.1 The Golden Age and the late First Feminist Wave

Today almost everybody can be considered familiar with the concept of superhero. Heroic characters who possess supernatural powers that they use to fight evil and super-villains have been present and relevant in modern history since what is called the “Golden Age of Comic Books”.

The Golden Age of Comic Books started in 1938 and continued until 1956, when it was ultimately replaced by the subsequent Silver Age. The Golden Age was the period in which modern comic books started being published and the archetype of superhero was defined. It was in those years that some of the characters that are still the most famous today were introduced. In fact, many authors cite the debut of Superman in 1938 as the determining event that marked the beginning of the Golden Age.

Superman appeared for the first time on April 18, 1938<sup>1</sup> in the Action Comics #1<sup>2</sup> which was published by Detective Comics, the predecessor of today’s DC Comics. This character became so popular so rapidly that other publishing companies decided to create superheroes of their own and the age of comic books and superheroes as we know the today begun, establishing one of the most well-known and successful forms of popular media.

The world had to wait until almost four years later for the first female superhero. During the 40’s the role of women in society shifted as a consequence of the second world war. A large part of the male population was engaged in the war, which led to important consequences regarding the roles of women, both for their own identities and in relation to men. One was that in several countries women volunteered or, in some cases, even conscripted in order to help their countries’ needs in the war. This meant that large numbers of women started working either in industries or in other military services and although they usually were not employed in combat, some countries indeed formed female corps that participated directly as officers. The largest British service was the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). It was formed on 9 September 1938 and it peaked at 213,000 women enrolled, many of whom served as anti-aircraft gun combat roles<sup>3</sup>. In the Soviet Union, about 820,000 women served in the military as medics, radio operators, truck drivers, snipers, combat pilots, and junior commanding officers<sup>4</sup>.

The situation in the United States was somewhat different. American women, too found themselves obliged to start working, since a large percentage of men was directly taken away from the work force and employed in the war efforts. Until that point, the U.S. had had barriers put in place in order to prevent married women from being employed, but the necessity of hiring workers into the military industry, especially in munitions, while all the men were at war, led to a strong weakening of such barriers. American

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<sup>1</sup> Catalog of Copyright Entries 1938 Periodicals Jan-Dec New Series Vol 33 Pt. 2. Volume 1, April 1938, available at: archive.org

<sup>2</sup> The Golden Age of Comic Books, *History Detectives Special Investigations*, available at: pbs.org

<sup>3</sup> Noakes, Lucy, 1907-1948 (2006), *Women in the British Army: war and the gentle sex*, p. 138. Routledge

<sup>4</sup> Krylova, Anna, (2010), *Soviet Women in Combat*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

women found themselves employed in jobs they were paid for, which allowed them a level of freedom they had never known until that point. This also led to the creation of *Rosie the Riveter*, the famous feminist icon, representing a woman wearing heavy working clothes and a red bandana to tie her hair. In addition to working in factories, roughly 300,000 women joined organizations such as the Women's Army Corps and participated even more directly in the war.

It was in this kind of historical and social context that the character of Wonder Woman appeared for the first time, in the October of 1941, on the pages of *All Star Comics #8*<sup>5</sup>. She was the first female main character in a comic book series to be a superhero as we know them today to be truly widely recognizable. The first actual female superhero was Fletcher Hanks's *Fantomah*<sup>6</sup>, but she was a minor character and her stories were often discontinued. There had been characters who were women before the Golden Age, but they did not fit into the stock character concept of evil-fighting hero who possesses superhuman abilities. Instead, Wonder Woman is princess Diana, the daughter of Hippolyta, queen of the island of Themyscira, who sculpted her from clay and gave her life as an Amazon. Diana has superhuman powers gifted to her by the Greek gods in order to protect who needs her. All of these aspects of her characterization are clear examples of how she perfectly fits the superhero definition. Wonder Woman's creators were psychologist and author William Moulton Marston and artist Harry G. Peter.<sup>7</sup> Marston was a strong supporter of the feminist movements of the time and he drew inspiration for the development of Wonder Woman from his wife Elizabeth Holloway and their partner Olive Byrne, with whom they were in a polyamorous relationship.

On October 25, 1940, Olive Byrne, who used to be Marston's student, published an interview with him, under the pseudonym Olive Richard. The interview was titled "Don't Laugh at the Comics" and in it, Marston talked about how comic books could be used as a powerful medium and about how their educational potential was not used to its fullest. The article appeared on the popular magazine *The Family Circle* and it sparked an interest in Max Gaines, who was a comic books publisher and he decided to hire Marston as an educational consultant for National Periodicals and All-American Publications, two of the companies that would later merge into DC Comics<sup>8</sup>. Marston quickly became interested in designing his own superhero character and talked to his wife Elizabeth about it. He told her that he wanted to develop a superhero who would win with love instead of with fists or bullets. "Fine." she said, "But make her a woman".<sup>9</sup> After obtaining the approval of Gaines, Marston began developing Wonder Woman, building her personality off of his time's new type of woman. Princess Diana is strong, she is free, she is not married and does not feel the need to be and she represents the liberated women who were working in factories to sustain their families in the absence of their deployed husbands. Wonder Woman's wide-band bracelets that can

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<sup>5</sup> *All Star Comics #8* (cover-dated Dec./Jan. 1941/1942, but released in October 1941. (See Library of Congress. Archived September 7, 2017, at the Wayback Machine) mikesamazingworld.com

<sup>6</sup> Markstein, Don. *Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle* (online) available at: toonopedia.com

<sup>7</sup> Garner, Dwight (October 23, 2014). "Books – Her Past Unchained 'The Secret History of Wonder Woman,' by Jill Lepore". The New York Times. Available at nytimes.com

<sup>8</sup> Lyons, Charles. *Suffering Sappho! A Look at the Creator & Creation of Wonder Woman*. Comic Book Resources, available at: cbr.com

<sup>9</sup> Lamb, Marguerite (2006). Who Was Wonder Woman? *Bostonia*. Available at archive.org

deflect bullets and protect her from the violence of firearms were based on the ones Olive Byrne started wearing as if they were wedding rings, after considering herself married to Marston and Elizabeth Holloway, in November 1925.<sup>10</sup> Marston was absolutely convinced that the kind of woman Diana of Themyscira represented would be the perfect leader, whose power comes from the love of their subjects. "Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, I believe, should rule the world", Marston wrote.<sup>11</sup> In her adventures, Wonder Woman was often captured and kept in chains by her enemies, but she always managed to break free, proving how much her creator despised the concept of women's subjugation.

Wonder Woman's strips began in the 40's, during the war. Her story begins when Steve Trevor, who is an American intelligence officer, crashes with his plane on the Amazons' island. Diana wins the right to help him return to his world where she ends up staying and helping him defeat the Nazis, following the common thread among superhero comic books of the Golden Age. However, Wonder Woman is revolutionary in this context because she never plays the role of the "damsel in distress". She is always perfectly capable of defending herself and she is always, at the core, free, in a society in which women were very rarely in charge of their own lives and were only allowed some degree of liberty because their husbands were away.

## 1.2 The early Feminist Second Wave and the Silver Age of Comic Books

The vast majority of popular comic books was published by American companies. Publishers soon realized that William Marston's theory was right and comic books could surely be used as an educational tool and possibly as propaganda as well. This meant that comic books greeted the early and mid-50's in a very peculiar socio-political environment that only became even more complex in the 60's.

During the years of the Second World War, American women had found themselves suddenly employed in factories and working full hours in order to support themselves and their own families, in the absence of men. This, however, came to an abrupt halt when said men came back and the post-war era came about. Veterans were given the absolute priority when it came to jobs and women were once again relegated to their roles of wives and mothers<sup>12</sup>, which obviously left them feeling betrayed and profoundly discontent, all while the country was in one of the best economic periods of its history. The baby boom apparently did not include women or cared about them as anything else than caregivers, as the media of that time made sure to fervently remind everyone. However, things started to slowly change when Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was translated in English and published in the United States in 1953.<sup>13</sup> The book is commonly seen as the publication that marked the beginning of the feminist second-wave and one of the pinnacles of

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<sup>10</sup> Lepore, Jill (2015). *The secret history of wonder woman*. Vintage. pp. 143–144.

<sup>11</sup> Hendrix, Grady (December 11, 2007). Out for Justice (online) The New York Sun. Available at: nysun.com

<sup>12</sup> D'Ann Campbell (1984), *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era*, ch. 8. Harvard University Press

<sup>13</sup> Moi, Toril (2002). *While we wait: The English translation of The Second Sex*. The university of Chicago Press

feminist literature and philosophy<sup>14</sup>, being the basis from which Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was written, a decade later, officially starting the movement in the U.S. as well.

Incidentally, in 1954, soon after the publication of *The Second Sex*, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was founded by the Comics Magazine Association of America as an autonomous body that would make it possible for comic publishers to self-regulate the contents of comic books. It was not mandatory and no law demanded publishing houses to follow it, but members of the Association would send their comics to the CCA, who would then decide if they observed the Code. If that was the case, the comic book could be published with the CCA's seal on the front cover. Although, as previously stated, no law made this seal mandatory, most sellers would not sell comics that did not have it, essentially making it close-to-impossible to successfully publish anything that was not CCA approved. The 1954 Code criteria were the following:

- Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
- If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.
- Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
- Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.
- In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.
- Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, the gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.
- No comic magazine shall use the words "horror" or "terror" in its title.
- All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
- All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
- Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
- Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited.
- Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden.
- Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure.
- Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
- Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.

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<sup>14</sup> du Plessix Gray, Francine (May 27, 2010), *Dispatches From the Other*, *The New York Times*, available at: [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)

- Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Rape scenes, as well as sexual abnormalities, are unacceptable.
- Seduction and rape shall never be shown or suggested.
- Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.
- Nudity with meretricious purpose and salacious postures shall not be permitted in the advertising of any product; clothed figures shall never be presented in such a way as to be offensive or contrary to good taste or morals.<sup>15</sup>

Following the CCA Code, DC Comics decided to implement its own Editorial Policy Code, which included specific regulations regarding the portrayal of female characters. The Code stated that “The inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance, and should be drawn realistically, without exaggeration of feminine physical qualities”<sup>16</sup>. This obviously had a strong impact on female characters in comic books and consequently for the quality of representation of women in media. Every male superhero had a female supporting character, but they mostly acted as damsels in distress that had to be saved, as the girlfriends, the wives, the lovers, the mistresses, but they were never at the same level of their male counterparts.

After World War II, superhero comic books had vastly declined in popularity, leaving the stage to horror, crime and romance that held much of the market, which led precisely to the implementation of the CCA, because of controversy regarding an alleged correlation between juvenile delinquency and crime or horror comic. Things changed once again in favor of superheroes when DC Comics decided to invest anew on the genre, in order to remain relevant in the market. This began officially with the introduction of the new version of The Flash, in 1956<sup>17</sup>, a date that marks the beginning of the Silver Age of Comic Books. During these years, a strong divide emerged between DC Comics and the newborn Marvel Comics, formerly known as Timely Publications. The former, even though it managed to successfully rework many of its heroes and to make them more interesting to a new audience, it still maintained a classic approach to its flagship characters and their stories of the 40’s. Conversely, the latter concentrated more on “fast action mixed with the emotional angst reflecting a world where social unrest was slowly coming to a boil”<sup>18</sup>. Marvel Comics managed to differentiate itself from other publishers thanks to Stan Lee’s idea to target superhero comic books to teenagers and older readers in general, rather than to children, who up until then had been the prevalent demographic. Therefore, Marvel became known for addressing matters that concerned an older

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<sup>15</sup> Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*, Interim Report, 1955, Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1955.

<sup>16</sup> Uslan, Michael(2002), *Batman in the Fifties*, Introduction, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Shutt, Craig (2003). *Baby Boomer Comics: The Wild, Wacky, Wonderful Comic Books of the 1960s!*. Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications. p. 20. The Silver Age started with Showcase #4, the Flash's first appearance.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, Roy, (2004), *Doom Patrol Archives, Volume 2*, p.5-6

audience.<sup>19</sup> While DC's superheroes had an aura of perfection, with their handsome presence, athletic built and well-defined moral status, Marvel was extremely successful in developing stories about heroes that were much more human. They had flaws, they were often outsiders, sometimes even monsters, while still being portrayed as the heroes. The Cold War and the general sense of fear and doubt that came about in that period, made the 60's a deeply complicated time and Marvel was able to make the most of it in the comics it published. DC's Justice League was introduced in 1960 as a team of the strongest superheroes of the DC universe and it was originally composed of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman and the Martian Manhunter<sup>20</sup> and it scored a great success. Considering that this new concept of superhero teams appeared to be very popular, Marvel decided to follow the same trend, resulting in The Fantastic Four, which was first published in November 1961<sup>21</sup>. The team is composed of Mister Fantastic (Reed Richards), the Invisible Girl (Susan Storm), the Human Torch (Johnny Storm) and The Thing (Ben Grimm). The four obtain their superhuman powers after an incident during a mission in space, when they are all hit by cosmic rays that grant them, respectively, the ability to stretch his body in any length and shape, invisibility, the ability to create flames and to fly, and strength, endurance and a rock-like skin, which also gives The Thing a monstrous appearance. The Fantastic Four show not only an uncommon level of diversity, with both a woman and a monster portrayed as heroes, but they are also described as profoundly human, with human-sized problems, pain and fears. The stark contrast between this type of characterization and that of DC's rigid heroes was truly revolutionary. Comic books readers were young people, but not children. They were the teenagers and young adults in a society that was living through great turmoil and social changes and Marvel was very good at taking advantage of this peculiar environment. "Comics historian Peter Sanderson compares the 1960s DC to a large Hollywood studio, and argues that after having reinvented the superhero archetype, DC by the latter part of the decade was suffering from a creative drought. The audience for comics was no longer just children, and Sanderson sees the 1960s Marvel as the comic equivalent of the French New Wave, developing new methods of storytelling that drew in and retained readers who were in their teens and older and thus influencing the comics writers and artists of the future."<sup>22</sup> During the Silver Age many new female characters were introduced. Following Invisible Girl, a number of women became recurring characters in the Marvel universe and even DC's new Supergirl, Superman's cousin, made her first appearance in those years, but they still played supporting roles and none of them were truly recognized as equals of their male counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Roberts, Randy; Olson, James S. (1998). *American Experiences: Readings in American History: Since 1865* (4 ed.). Addison-Wesley. p. 317, Marvel Comics employed a realism in both characterization and setting in its superhero titles that was unequaled in the comic book industry.

<sup>20</sup> Fox, Gardner (w), Sekowsky, Mike (p), Sachs, Bernard, Giella, Joe, Anderson, Murphy (i), (March 1960), *Starro the Conqueror The Brave and the Bold* 28.

<sup>21</sup> Stan Lee (1974), *Origins of Marvel Comics A Fireside Book*, Simon and Schuster, p. 16

<sup>22</sup> Sanderson, Peter (October 10, 2003), *Comics in Context #14: Continuity/Discontinuity*, *IGN.com* (online), available at: [www.ign.com](http://www.ign.com).

<sup>23</sup> Madrid, Mike (2009), *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the history of Comic Book Heroines*, United States of America: Exterminating Angel Press.



### 1.3 Late Feminist Second Wave and the Bronze Age of Comic Books

It is generally agreed upon that the second wave of feminism in the U.S started with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*<sup>24</sup>, which was influenced by Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In her book, Friedan challenged the widely shared belief in the 1950s that "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother." She talked about the representation of women in the media, where they were only depicted as part of the "traditional" nuclear family, which was also firmly advertised as the only viable option for them, but which, she found, made them profoundly unhappy and unfulfilled, as opposed to the widespread belief that any woman's aspiration was to be wives and mothers.<sup>25</sup> Friedan's book essentially made the liberation of women, gender roles and sexism a topic of debate in a society that was grievously silent about these issues. People started to talk about it and to act as well. In 1970 San Diego State University was the first university in the United States to offer a selection of women's studies courses.<sup>26</sup> Substantially, in the 60's the new women's liberation movements became a reality and they sparked real change that continued well into the 70's and until the early 80's, truly altering the collective attitude towards women, which made the second feminist wave a successful movement.

In this tense social environment, in which the new feminist ideas were spreading rapidly, the comic books industry could not avoid getting involved and 1970 is generally considered to be the year in which the Bronze Age of Comic Books started<sup>27</sup>. The number of female characters grew considerably in numbers, heroes and villains alike, both because of the feminist movements themselves and because companies figured that it would have most likely been profitable to diversify readership and target products at women and girls, too. Even though many characters were still portrayed as quite stereotypical, occasionally being used as parody of feminists.<sup>28</sup> "Meanwhile in the underground comic circle The Women's Liberation Basement Press began published a one-shot comic titled *That Ain't Me Babe* in 1970 that featured many of the most famous female comic icons. "Supergirl tells Superman to get lost, Veronica ditches Archie for Betty, Petunia Pig tells Porky Pig to cook his own dinner". This would evolve into *Wimmen's Comix*, an underground anthology series that would run through 1992, dealing many controversial women's issues"<sup>29</sup>. Contrary to The Golden Age and The Silver Age, which had specific events that signaled their beginnings, that is, respectively, Superman's first appearance, and The Flash's modern version, the Bronze Age was not marked by one particular occurrence, but rather by a multitude of events. One was the issue of *Green Lantern* of April 1970, which included a new character, Green Arrow, that appeared in the title. "The series,

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<sup>24</sup> Sweet, Corinne (February 7, 2006), *The Independent*. London.

<sup>25</sup> Friedan, Betty (2013), *The Feminine Mystique*, W.W.Norton & Company, Inc. pp. 11-20.

<sup>26</sup> Shaw, Susan; Lee, Janet (2014-04-23), *Women's voices, feminist visions : classic and contemporary readings*, New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education

<sup>27</sup> *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*

<sup>28</sup> Bradford W. Wright, (2003), *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, John Hopkins University Press, p250

<sup>29</sup> Jill., Lepore (2015), *The secret history of wonder woman*, Vintage, pp. 283–284.

written by Denny O'Neil and penciled by Neal Adams, focused on "relevance" as Green Lantern was exposed to poverty and experienced self-doubt."<sup>30</sup> A few months later Jack Kirby left Marvel, ending his partnership with Stan Lee, adding to the series of changes that characterized the first years of The Bronze Age. As a matter of fact, a substantial number of the writers and artists that had been the backbone of the previous Ages retired or advanced to managing positions, leaving room for a whole new generation of creators.

In the wake of these changes, both in society and in comic books publishing houses, a new female superhero appears on the pages of Marvel comics. In 1977 the women's liberation movement was at its peak and the year was greeted by the first issue of Ms. Marvel, published in January. Ms. Marvel was originally realized to be Captain Marvel's female counterpart, but the character progressed and evolved substantially throughout the years, assuming different personas and titles. The character portrayed in the 1977 comic book was Carol Danvers, who had actually appeared for the first time a few years earlier, in 1968, created originally by Roy Thomas and Gene Colan as a human officer of the United States Air Force. In Captain Marvel #18 of November 1969 she is involved in an explosion together with the hero Captain Marvel, who is a Kree, an alien race. When she makes her new appearance as Ms. Marvel, written in the beginning by Gerry Conway and then by Chris Claremont, her DNA has blended with Captain Marvel's, giving her superpowers and making her a human-Kree hybrid<sup>32</sup>. Ms. Marvel became a feminism icon, embracing all the new values that the movement was promoting. Even her name, with the honorific "Ms." was a strong signal in solidarity with the social cause. From 1978 she became a permanent member of the team of superheroes, The Avengers and she was in general portrayed as extremely powerful, but the level of actual equality that her character experienced in terms of representation was not as high as it tried to be. The feminist movements were trying their best to promote a new type of woman that would be independent and free and the new stories of Ms. Marvel appeared to depict such a woman. However, in The Avengers #200 of October 1980, Carol Danvers is kidnapped by a villain, who takes her into another dimension, brainwashes her, rapes her and leaves her pregnant of essentially himself, while the rest of The Avengers, her teammates, have no clue as to why she would not want to keep the "child" and to make everything even better, she ends up falling in love with this being who made her a prisoner and tortured her and she goes to live with him<sup>33</sup>. This was a very controversial event, but it was not that uncommon. The habit of using violence towards women in order to further the plots of male characters was and unfortunately still is a frequent tool in all kinds of media and Carol Danvers surely could have been treated better by her creators in her early years, but her character did have interesting developments in the following Ages of Comic Books. Nevertheless, female

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<sup>30</sup> Jacobs, Will, Gerard, Jones (1985), *The Comic Book Heroes: From the Silver Age to the Present*, New York, New York: Crown Publishing Group, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> Scott (2008), "Scott's Classic Comics Corner: A New End to the Silver Age Pt. 1", *Comic Book Resources* (online), available at: [www.cbr.com](http://www.cbr.com)

<sup>32</sup> *Ms. Marvel #1-23* (January 1977 – April 1979). New York: Marvel Comics.

<sup>33</sup> Madrid, Mike (2009), *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the history of Comic Book Heroines*, United States of America: Exterminating Angel Press.

character did become more relevant and powerful from the early 80's, which constituted the late part of the Bronze Age. Susan Richards (née Storm) left her identity as Invisible Girl, embracing the one of Invisible Woman who eventually chaired The Fantastic Four, while Wasp led The Avengers in an unprecedented amount of female leadership. One of the fundamental changes in the representation of women in comic books was made by the new characters in the Uncanny X-Men series, which had been relaunched in 1975. Although many of the characters were not new and had been a part of the X-Men universe for a long time, they were given new costumes, new code-names, stronger personalities and much more power, like Jean Grey's character, previously known as Marvel Girl, who became Phoenix, one of the most powerful members of the Marvel Universe. Additionally, the X-Men welcomed, in those years, Storm, aka Ororo Monroe, one of the first and most famous black superheroes ever, who was immediately depicted as strong, assertive and competent from her very first appearance.<sup>34</sup> The Bronze Age ended having witnessed some undeniable mistakes, but many successes as well. Not only this Age saw the birth of many new or remodeled strong female characters, but it was also the period that witnessed a strong surge in superheroes who are black or otherwise members of minorities. Notably, Monica Rambeau, a black woman, became the second Captain Marvel in 1982, with the power of transforming herself into any kind of energy, making a woman of color one of the leaders of The Avengers. The Bronze Age was undoubtedly influenced by the feminist Second Wave, which saw, among its other successes, the birth of many new and powerful female characters.

#### 1.4 The Third and Fourth Feminist Waves and the Modern Age of Comic Books

The Feminist Second Wave is generally considered a success. Thanks to the movement, American women did win a number of battles, including Title IX, which guaranteed equal access to education, access to the recently developed birth control medication, the legalization of abortion, the establishment of policies against sexual harassment at work, the foundation of shelters for victims of domestic violence and abuse and the institution of women's studies courses in American Universities. However, in the early 90's it was clear that there was still a lot to do in order to further women's liberation process. The origins of the Third Wave are generally rooted in both the birth of the "riot grrrl" punk subculture and the testimony of academic Anita Hill that she had been sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas, who was nominated and subsequently elected to the Supreme Court. As a matter of fact, the term "Third Wave" appeared for the first time on an article by Rebecca Walker for Ms. Magazine in which she commented on Thomas's appointment and wrote: "So I write this as a plea to all women, especially women of my generation: Let Thomas's confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not

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<sup>34</sup> Madrid, Mike (2009). *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the history of Comic Book Heroines*. United States of America: Exterminating Angel Press.

have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave."<sup>35</sup> The main topics on which the Third Wave was focused surrounded intersectionality, a term which indicates the notion that women face oppression in different layers, including, other than gender, race and social class<sup>36</sup>. The Feminist Third Wave was in fact concerned with the problem that although the Second Wave had reached many of its goals, it had also concentrated on issues that were primarily relevant for white, middle-class women, without taking into consideration the struggles that poorer women of color could face. Additionally, Third Wave Feminism welcomed individualism and diversity as essential values of the movement, which led to it being particularly interested in a sexual kind of liberation as a fundamental part of women's fight for equal rights. It was in this new social context that the Modern Age of Comic Books started, even more than the Bronze Age, without a definite and easily identifiable event. It is generally considered to have started in the mid-80's and to continue to the present day<sup>37</sup>. For Marvel Comics the transition from the Bronze Age to the Modern Age was smoother because the main changes in terms of management of the company and character restyling had already happened, so it was DC Comics the one to experience a more decisive shift from one age to the other, with the publication of Crisis Of Infinite Earths, which had the goal to unify the DC Universe. The latter had, until that point, been made of many different dimensions, which writer Marvin Wolfman thought too complex for readers. Crisis On Infinite Earths led to the discontinuation of The Flash, Superman and Wonder Woman that all reappeared later almost completely rebranded. In addition to the new DC Universe, the Modern Age was characterized by the rise of antiheroes, who defied the previous ideal, perfect hero, exploring morally grey areas in a way that was completely new. Regarding this trend, a popular female comic character became Tank Girl aka Rebecca Buck, who challenged all stereotypes about femininity and was a peak for feminist comic books. Created by British artist Jamie Hewlett<sup>38</sup> and writer Alan Martin, she had a shaved head and she wore punk clothes, impersonating the subversive fashion of those years. She drives a tank inside of which she lives as well and after having worked for a secret organization she is declared an outlaw because she abuses of substances and has unacceptable sexual inclinations. The 90's however still witnessed much violence towards women in comic books and the media in general (as well as obviously in real life), being at the same time victims of comic books villains and the hyper-sexualized objects of male readers' fantasies. Because of this, in 1999 a group of feminist fans of comics created Women In Refrigerators, a website that, still active today, compiles a list of all comic books in which female characters are injured, sexually abused, murdered or otherwise deprived of their powers in order to have a reaction from the male protagonist and further is storyline.<sup>39</sup> Since the sexual liberation of

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<sup>35</sup> Walker, Rebecca (January 1992), "Becoming the Third Wave" (PDF), available at: [it.scribd.com Ms.: 39-41](https://it.scribd.com/Ms.:39-41).

<sup>36</sup> Evans, Elizabeth (2015), *The Politics of Third Wave Feminism: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality and the State in Britain and the US*, Palgrave Macmillan UK.

<sup>37</sup> *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* (2008), Glossary, p. 1028.

<sup>38</sup> A few years after the birth of Tank Girl, Hewlett came up with the idea of form a virtual band. His idea came alive thanks to him teaming up with musician Damon Albarn and in 1998 they created Gorillaz.

<sup>39</sup> Simone, Gail (March 1999), Women in Refrigerators, *LBY3* (online), available at: [lby3.com](https://lby3.com)

women was a central topic of Third Wave Feminism, the objectification of the female body, comics included, became of fundamental importance when it came to a feminist analysis of the portrayal of women in media. It is important to notice that the 90's and the early 2000's saw the emergence of TV Series based on the lives of superheroes that were as influenced by feminist ideals as much as every other type of media. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and its spin-off *Angel* (1999-2004), aired in a period that was almost perfectly in the middle between the late Third Wave and the beginning of the Feminist Fourth Wave. It became one of the most influential pieces of media in history and it has been declared the most studied pop culture work by academics<sup>40</sup>. It featured a strong female protagonist that was also very human. Buffy had superhuman powers, but she was also a normal teenager in the late 90's. The series featured the first lesbian couple shown to kiss and be overtly affectionate with each other, together with many other features that were directly influenced by Third Wave Feminism and its values. The late 90's and early 2000's were the years in which superheroes started to be featured on television, giving the genre a whole new format. Although comic books and loyal comic books readers are still relevant today, the general public has shifted its attention towards television and cinema when it comes to superheroes and publishing companies such as Marvel and DC Comics have invested in this new medium.

With the new millennium and the mainstream use of technology, the Feminist Third Wave that had peaked in the 90's, turned into a Fourth Wave. "Jennifer Baumgardner identifies fourth-wave feminism as starting in 2008 and continuing into the present day."<sup>41</sup> "According to Kira Cochrane, a fourth wave had appeared in the U.K. and several other nations by 2012-13. It focused on: sexual inequality as manifested in "street harassment, sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, body-shaming, media images, on intersectionality; on social media technology for communication and online petitioning for organizing; and on the perception, inherited from prior waves, that individual experiences are shared and thus can have political solutions."<sup>42</sup> The emergence of new technology not only made connections between people and networking easier, but it also meant that producing movies and TV shows about people with "realistic" superpowers became more feasible because the special effects needed became progressively less expensive. The first to jump the cinema wagon was Marvel, that released *Iron Man* in 2008, starting the Marvel Cinematic Universe. DC Comics arrived a few years later, in 2013, with *Man of Steel*, which meant the beginning of the DC Extended Universe. Both companies have released movies and TV series with numerous female characters and they have been praised as well as critiqued for the way such characters have been portrayed. It is widely recognized that in the last decade the quality of representation of women in the media has visibly improved. Women have become stronger, without necessarily losing their femininity and their storylines include personal growth, rather than just being a male character's sidekick or love interest.

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<sup>40</sup> Lametti, Daniel, Harris, Aisha, Geiling, Natasha, Matthews-Ramo, Natalie (June 11, 2012), Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most?, *Slate* (online), available at: slate.com

<sup>41</sup> Baumgardner, Jennifer (2011), Is there a fourth wave? Does it matter?, *Feminist.com* (online), available at: feminist.com

<sup>42</sup> Cochrane, Kira (December 10, 2013), The fourth wave of feminism: meet the rebel women, *The Guardian* (online), available at: theguardian.com

Additionally, depictions of women as victims of violence, sexual harassment or rape have decreased and gender stereotypes are being challenged more and more in the comic books realm<sup>43</sup>. Albeit imperfect or incomplete, the progress made when it comes to the representation of women in media is undeniable. The war has surely not been won and women still struggle every day fighting for equality, but every victory deserves to be celebrated and the most recent years have watched women win several battles.

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<sup>43</sup> Dan, Rudh, Andrew Meichtry, Arne, Laudwehr; Michael Iacob, Jordan, Augustdt, *Depiction of Gender in American Superhero Comic Books, 1960-2010, a quantitative content analysis*, Portland State University research.

## 2. Analysis of the changes in women's representation throughout the Ages of Comic Books

In the previous chapter I have summarized the history of female characters in superhero comics and how such characters developed through the decades, in a rapidly changing society. As we have seen, the quality of representation of women in media, and more specifically in comic books, has undeniably changed, but this process has not been linear one at all. Although more than eighty years have passed since 1938 and the birth of the modern concept of superhero, it is still hard today to find characters that are not somehow defined by a certain kind of gender bias. As a result of sexism and low-quality representation of women in media, a variety of tools and measures have been developed in order to better analyze pieces of media and their ability to depict women in a non-stereotypical way. These measures are helpful in order to determine exactly how much the representation of women in comic books has improved in quality and quantity. In this chapter the analysis will concentrate namely on Marvel and DC Comics, considering that they are the biggest and oldest companies, allowing for a bigger data pool.

### 2.1 Main measures of women's representation in media

The most famous measure of women's representation in media is probably the Bechdel Test. Also known as the Bechdel-Wallace test, it was named after the American artist and cartoonist Alison Bechdel who claims she was given the idea by her friend Liz Wallace who was in turn inspired by Virginia Woolf's writings. The requirements that form the Bechdel Test appeared for the first time, technically as a joke, on Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* in 1985, in a strip called "The Rule". In the comic two women are talking about watching a movie at the theatre and one of them says that she only takes the time to go see a film if it is able to satisfy three requirements<sup>44</sup>:

1. It has to have at least two women in it
2. Who talk to each other
3. About something besides a man

Even though these are apparently not particularly demanding, most movies that are considered "cult" do not pass the Bechdel test. A 2012 study of sexual and violent content by gender analyzed 855 of the most financially successful American movies from 1950 to 2006. The study found that on average there were two male characters for every female character and this trend remained unchanged during the decades of the study.<sup>45</sup> In a later study carried out from 2007 to 2014 showed that just 30% of characters who were actually

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<sup>44</sup> Bechdel, Allison, (October 1, 1986), *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Firebrand Books

<sup>45</sup> Bleakley, A.; Jamieson, P. E.; Romer, D. (2012). Trends of Sexual and Violent Content by Gender in Top-Grossing U.S. Films, 1950–2006, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, available at: jahonline.org

speaking in films were women.<sup>46</sup> It is clear how even these seemingly undemanding rules are too often disregarded. The test started to be used by critics in order to judge movies and other kinds of media in the 2010's and subsequently became one of the most widely known and used measure of equality.

In 1991, a few years after the first appearance of the Bechdel Test, American poet, essayist and critic Katha Pollitt wrote on The New York Times about the Smurfette Principle<sup>47</sup>. This refers to the habit, in media such as film, television shows and the like, of including only one woman in groups that are otherwise composed of all male characters and it is therefore tightly connected to the Bechdel Test. The principle's name is based on Smurfette, who is the only female character among the Smurfs. Considering that the Smurfs live as a community in a village, the fact that there is only one female "citizen" is pretty good evidence of how much women in media are considered as an added bonus, rather than as essential members of society. Pollitt wrote: "Contemporary shows are either essentially all-male, like "Garfield", or are organized on what I call the Smurfette principle: a group of male buddies will be accented by a lone female, stereotypically defined... The message is clear. Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals, girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys". The Smurfette Principle goes to show how it is engrained in society that the male experience is also the universal experience, while the experiences of women are first and foremost of little relevance and, secondly, they are only interesting to other women. A piece of media that is targeted mostly to men can be easily consumed by anyone, but when it is targeted towards women it suddenly becomes a "chick flick" and any man should refrain from consuming because it would be somewhat emasculating to do so. The female characters in movies or television shows that embody the Smurfette Principle may have a relevant role in the plot, but they mostly exists in relation to the other male characters and, since there is only one of them, they are usually portrayed as stereotypically feminine, without room for complexity. Obviously, any piece of media with an ensemble of characters that fits the Smurfette Principle cannot pass the Bechdel Test because it makes it impossible to fulfill all three requirements.

In addition to the two aforementioned measures of representation, it is interesting to take into consideration the more recently developed tool, the Sexy Lamp Test. It assesses how significant a female character is in respect to the plot of the work, and it became more widely known when it was mentioned for the first time by comic book writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, during a panel at Emerald City Comic Con<sup>48</sup>. Essentially, the test focuses on how often female characters are present, but they are not relevant to the story. They could be replaced with a "sexy lamp"<sup>49</sup> and the storyline would not be affected. In DeConnick's words: "As an industry, we have to make more female-led books that are actually worth buying. Never mind the

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<sup>46</sup> Smith, Stacy L., Choueiti, Marc, Pieper, Katherine, Gillig, Traci, Lee, Carmen, Dylan, DeLuca, Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014, *USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism*

<sup>47</sup> Pollitt, Katha, (7 April 1991) Hers; The Smurfette Principle, *The New York Times*, available at: [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)

<sup>48</sup> Writing Women (5 march 2013) – The Sexy Lamp Test, *Endless Realms* (online), available at: [endlessrealms.org](http://endlessrealms.org)

<sup>49</sup> The sexy lamp is a reference to the one present in the 1983 movie "A Christmas Story". Said lamp is made of a lampshade, mounted on a fake leg in a fishnet stocking.



Bechdel test, try this: if you can replace your female character with a sexy lamp and the story still basically works, maybe you need another draft. They have to be protagonists, not devices.”<sup>50</sup>. Especially when it comes to action movies, finding one that passes the Sexy Lamp Test appears to be a quest. To get back on the topic of superheroes, a good example of a movie not passing the Sexy Lamp Test would be the 2013 adaptation of Superman, directed by Zack Snyder. Lois Lane’s character essentially exists to be saved by her boyfriend Superman and little more. “All Lois Lane does in this movie is fall out of the sky. I don’t know how she won that Pulitzer, because it is pretty hard to write when you are a glorified rag doll being thrown out of a plane. The sexy lamp would at least have been quieter about it.”<sup>51</sup>

These are all examples of ways to determine the quality of media when it comes to portraying women as more than just *eye candy*. The fact that very high percentages of films and shows fail these tests shows that there is still a long way to go in order to reach gender equality in media, but there has been a curve of improvement throughout the decades, both in cinematic works and in comic books, with which I am more interested for what concerns this dissertation. In the next paragraphs I will discuss how gender roles and the portrayal of women have changed in Marvel Comics and how female audiences has played a role in DC Comics throughout the eighty years the two companies have been publishing their comic books.

## 2.2 Changing gender roles in Marvel comic books and society from the Silver Age to the Modern Age

Following the release of the Wonder Woman movie in 2017, which I will analyze more in depth in the next chapter, the feeling started to spread that this movie marked the beginning of fundamental changes in the entertainment industry when it comes to the representation of women. It is undeniably true that from the early days of superhero comic books the portrayal of women and their roles have significantly changed, but there is still a long way to go. As of 2017, 26,7% of all characters in DC and Marvel comics were female<sup>52</sup> and there are clear gender imbalances and bias dictated by gender roles and stereotypes, but it is still an improvement.

Comic books, as all kinds of media, do not exist in a vacuum. They are heavily influenced by social standards and, in turn, they have great power in influencing society. This means that analyzing how the way of telling superhero stories changed in time can give us excellent insight into the changes our society and culture experienced and, in this particular context, in the way that the world has treated and continues to treat women, whether real or fictional. A 2014 study by Katherine J. Murphy managed to prove how much female

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<sup>50</sup> Hudson, Laura, (19 march 2012) Kelly Sue Deconnick on the Evolution of Carol Danvers to Captain Marvel (Interview), *Comics Alliance* (online), available at: [comicsalliance.com](http://comicsalliance.com)

<sup>51</sup> Berrett, Jenni (2 July 2015), Films That Totally Fail The Sexy Lamp Test, *Ravishly.com*, , available at [ravishly.com](http://ravishly.com).

<sup>52</sup> Shendruk, Amanda, Analyzing the Gender Representation of 34,476 Comic Book Characters, *The Pudding 2017*, available at [pudding.cool](http://pudding.cool).

gender roles have changed in Marvel comics, from the Silver Age to the most recent years. The study was carried out by analyzing 68 titles, consisting of 788 comics, from decade to decade, starting from 1960 until 2014<sup>53</sup>, the year of publication of the article<sup>54</sup>. The results were recorded on the basis of seven different values, scored from 0 to 5: average cover art, Bechdel Test, storyline, occupation, balance of power, female sexualization, and violence against women.

The cover art is analyzed on the basis of the number of women who appear on the cover, the ration of female superheroes to male characters, the size and proportions of female bodies, and how active or passive they are.<sup>55</sup> For what concerns storylines, female characters have traditionally had very poor ones, often being treated as little more than window dressing, greatly failing the Sex Lap Test and defining gender roles in very clear ways: men do the saving and women are only there to be saved and looking pretty while doing so. When talking about occupation, Even Susan Storm aka Invisible Woman, who was a very powerful superhero, was originally “relegated to the role of girlfriend, wife and mother”<sup>56</sup>, while her male colleagues had the luxury of having interesting careers when they were not wearing their superhero costumes. “The superheroine was placed on a pedestal of achievement, playing with the boys, and developing strength and identity in areas not traditionally available to women. But as females in a majority male universe, symbolically they had nowhere to go except into the roles of women that were recognizable and familiar”<sup>57</sup> When it comes to balance of power, equality has always been far from reach. For decades female superheroes were little more than sidekicks and they had no real presence if it were not for the male heroes. She-Hulk, Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel were the girlfriends, the helpers, the ones who had to be saved and did not have authority or decisional power. They did not have freedom of choice and they depended on their male counterparts.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, it has to be kept in mind that between 1954 and 2005 the Comic Book Code Authority was effectively regulating and censoring the comic books market, concerning itself with gender roles, sexuality and violence, especially towards women, but the reality was that female characters were very often hyper-sexualized and treated as objects of desire for the male gaze. Aggressions, rape and any version of violence towards women has been a constant in superhero comic books. The reality was that female characters were very often hyper-sexualized and treated as objects of desire for the male gaze, as

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<sup>53</sup> 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1979, 1980 to 1989, 1990 to 1999, 2000 to 2009, and 2010 to 2014

<sup>54</sup> List of all comic books reviewed: *A-Babies vs. X-Babies*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Amazing X-Men*, *Angela Asgard's Assassin*, *The Annihilators*, *Astonishing Ant-Man*, *Astonishing X-Men*, *The Avengers*, *Avengers vs. X-Men*, *Captain Marvel*, *The Champions*, *Classic X-Men*, *Cyclops and Phoenix*, *The Daily Bugle*, *Daredevil*, *Daredevil and Black Widow*, *Dark Phoenix*, *DC vs. Marvel*, *Deadpool*, *The Defenders*, *Excalibur*, *Fall of the Hulks*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Generation X*, *Ghost Rider*, *Hulk Smash*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Invincible Iron Man*, *Iron Man*, *Magneto*, *Marvel Super Heroes*, *The Mighty Thor*, *Ms. Marvel*, *Namor*, *The New Avengers*, *Nightcrawler*, *Power Man*, *Ravage 2099*, *Rocket Raccoon*, *The Runaways*, *Satana*, *The Savage She-Hulk*, *Secret Invasion*, *The Sensational She-Hulk*, *The Silver Surfer*, *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine*, *The Spider-Woman*, *Storm*, *Super Villain*, *Survive*, *Tales to Astonish*, *Tales of Suspense*, *Thor*, *Triple Action*, *The Ultimate Spider-Man*, *The Ultimates*, *Ultimatum 2099*, *Uncanny X-Men*, *The Uncanny X-Force*, *Venom 2099*, *World War Hulk*, *Wolverine*, *X-Factor*, *X-Force*, *X-Men*, *The X-Men Adventures*, *X-Men Fairy Tales*, and *The Young Avengers*.

<sup>55</sup> Larew, 1997, p. 596

<sup>56</sup> Dunne, 2006, p. 6

<sup>57</sup> D'Amore, L. M. (2012). The accidental supermom: Superheroines and maternal performativity, 1963-1980. *Journal of Popular Culture* D'Amore, p. 1229

<sup>58</sup> Ito, K. (1994). Images of women in weekly male comic magazines in Japan. *Journal of Popular Culture*, p. 87

bodies that are good only as something to be ogled. Finally, “comics have traditionally exploited women for male readership, making violence against women the 7th indicator. “Women often serve the role of perpetual victim in comic books. They are threatened, kidnapped, assaulted, humiliated, violated, and often killed”<sup>59</sup> All the scores of these categories got higher through time and what makes it particularly interesting from a sociological point of view is that “One benefit of analyzing gender through comics is the ability to track attitudes over time”<sup>60</sup>. The target readers of comic books have changed together with the quality of the portrayal of women. For decades the bulk of readers was made of boys. In 1995 merely 13.41% of comic book readers were female and between 25 and 35, significantly outside of the average age of their male counterparts, who were mostly below the age of 25<sup>61</sup>. However, in 2014 a striking 46.67% of comic book readers were young women, making up essentially half of the readership.<sup>62</sup> This is linked to the fact that in the most recent years Marvel released a number of titles with female protagonists, which attracted a wave of female leaders. The 2013-2014 biennium welcomed four new superwomen on Marvel pages: astrophysicist Jane Foster as the new incarnation of Thor, considered one of the most powerful characters of the Marvel Universe; Kamala Khan, teenage Pakistani-American Muslim girl as the new Ms. Marvel, one of Marvel’s oldest female characters; Angela Asgard’s Assassin; and Carol Danvers as the latest version of Captain Marvel, who has been effectively declared the strongest Avenger. With characters like these it is only fair that Marvel comics have started to attract a lot more female readers.

Katherine J. Murphy’s analysis wanted to establish whether or not, and in what capacity, the comic book industry saw an improvement in the quality of representation of women in the years from the Silver Age to the present. This would also promote a better understanding of how women are depicted in popular culture, therefore making the study notably fascinating. As I mentioned earlier, the last few years saw the advent of several new female characters and it was thus speculated by Murphy that in the last ten years Marvel has published titles with more complex, less stereotypical female characters, resulting in more equal gender roles. The quantitative analysis that was carried out in the study proved that, by rating comic books according to the aforementioned seven categories, “the average female gender roles scores consistently went up by decade from 12.20 in the 1960’s to 22.50 from 2010 to 2014”<sup>63</sup>.

Regarding the category of cover art, in the first decade analyzed no issue managed to score over two, but in the last there were fourteen that obtained a perfect score of five.

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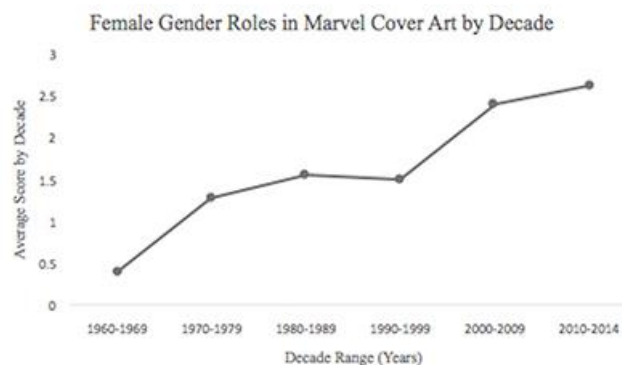
<sup>59</sup> Larew, K. G. (1997). Planet women: The image of women in Planet Comics, 1940-1953. *Historian* 59(3), Farmington Hills, Michigan: Greenhaven Press, p. 602.

<sup>60</sup>Dr. Blanch, Christina (1 January 2013), What Do Comic Books Teach Us About Gender Attitudes?, *Forbes.com*, available at [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

<sup>61</sup> Emad, M. C. (2006). Reading Wonder Woman's body: Mythologies of gender and nation. *Journal Of Popular Culture*, p. 969-970.

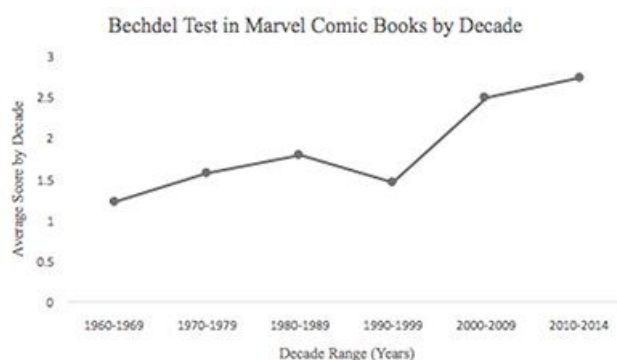
<sup>62</sup> Schenker, B. (2014, February 1). Facebook fandom spotlight: Who are the US comic fans? *GraphicPolicy.com* (online), available at: [graphicpolicy.com](http://graphicpolicy.com)

<sup>63</sup> Murphy, Katherine J., (2014) Analyzing Female Gender Roles in Marvel Comics from the Silver Age (1960) to the Present, *Student Pulse Journal Press*, available at [www.inquiriesjournal.com](http://www.inquiriesjournal.com).



**Figure 1** The average scores for this category were 0.39 for 1960 to 1969, 1.27 for 1970 to 1979, 1.54 for 1980 to 1989, 1.48 for 1990 to 1999, 2.39 for 2000 to 2009, and 2.61 for 2010 to 2014. Comparing 2010-2014 data to each decade found significance at  $p = .001$  for 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1979, 1980 to 1989, and 1990 to 1999. No significance was found for 2000 to 2009.

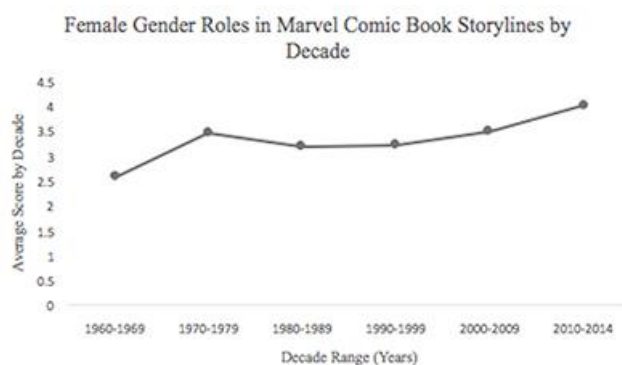
For what concerns the Bechdel Test there has been constant improvement during the decades analyzed. A modest decrease was recorded in the 90's, most likely linked to the conservative backlash that the US experienced in those years and to the "Plastic Age", a period of the Modern Age of Comic Books during which the comics industry was struggling and every character seemed disposable, even more so if they were women. The results for Cover Art and the Bechdel Test are quite similar and understandably so, considering that both focus on the number of women present.



**Figure 2** The average scores for this category were 1.21 for 1960 to 1969, 1.57 for 1970 to 1979, 1.79 for 1980 to 1989, 1.46 for 1990 to 1999, 2.48 for 2000 to 2009, and 2.72 for 2010 to 2014. Comparing 2010 to 2014 data to each decade found significance at  $p = .001$  for 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1979, 1980 to 1989, and 1990 to 1999. No significance was found for 2000 to 2009.

Gender roles in Storylines of Marvel comics is the third indicator and, as it happened for the other ones as well, it showed an increase in score from the first decade analyzed to the 2010-2014 period, going from a score of 2.55 to a close-to-perfect- 4.00. The perceived universality of the male experience plays an

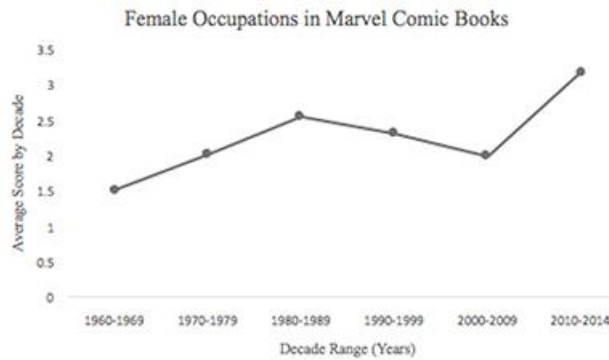
important role when it comes to women's storyline and representation. The storylines of male protagonists, especially in the early years of Comic Books, are apparently the only ones worth deepening. Female characters were usually shown taking part in very stereotypically gendered activities, like cooking or taking care of children, they mostly stayed in the background and were shown for a very short time. "This was how the phenomenon of the two-panel woman in comic books was born. The two-panel woman is a female character who appears for two panels in the comic book just to make dinner or calm a baby, for instance, and then disappears. She is a one-dimensional character who has no bearing on the storyline of the comic book"<sup>64</sup>. During the cultural backlash of the 90's, the two-panel woman became fairly common once again, lowering the score for those years, but it later started to rise again and pretty steadily as well.



**Figure 3** The average scores for this category were 2.55 for 1960 to 1969, 3.44 for 1970 to 1979, 3.18 for 1980 to 1989, 3.20 for 1990 to 1999, 3.48 for 2000 to 2009, and 4.00 for 2010 to 2014. Comparing 2010-2014 data to each decade found significance at  $p = .001$  for 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1979, 1980 to 1989, and 1990 to 1999. Significance was found for 2000 to 2009 at  $p = .005$ .

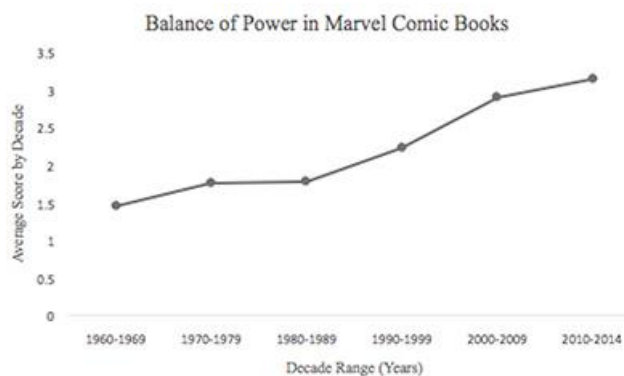
Speaking of the 90's cultural backlash, female Occupation in Marvel Comic books was also affected by it. This fourth category showed a similar dip to the Storylines one. It went from a very low 1.50 in the 60's to 3.16 in 2014, but managed to reach below the 2.00 score during the 2000-2009 decade. Marvel artist and writer Trina Robbins stated that in those years "Comics changed. There were very few superheroines that had their own titles . . . There was nothing out there for girls to read anymore" (Chenault, 2007). However, it still got better and considerably fast as well, as can be seen in the steep inclination in the graph.

<sup>64</sup> Murphy, Katherine J., (2014) Analyzing Female Gender Roles in Marvel Comics from the Silver Age (1960) to the Present, *Student Pulse Journal Press*, available at [www.inquiriesjournal.com](http://www.inquiriesjournal.com).



**Figure 4** Figure 4. The average scores for this category were 1.50 for 1960 to 1969, 2.00 for 1970 to 1979, 2.53 for 1980 to 1989, 2.31 for 1990 to 1999, 1.98 for 2000 to 2009, and 3.16 for 2010 to 2014. Comparison 2010-2014 of data to each decade found significance ( $p = .001$ ) for 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1979, 1990 to 1999, and 2000 to 2009. Significance was found for 1980 to 1989 at  $p = .05$ .

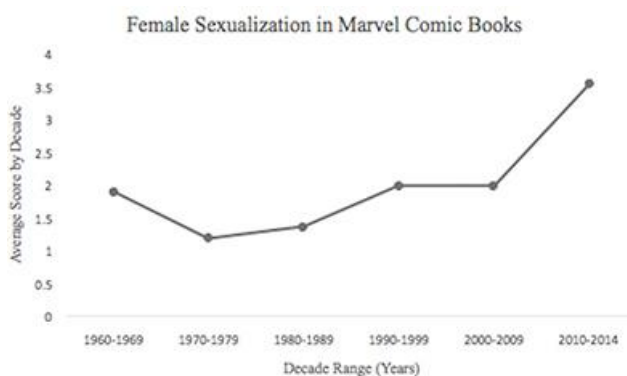
The fifth indicator, Balance of Power, is essentially the only one that rose steadily, albeit slowly, without being influenced by the 90's return to conservative attitudes, possibly because of the wave of women who started to access positions of power in business after the turn of the millennium, which was documented in comic books.



**Figure 5** The average scores for this category were 1.45 for 1960 to 1969, 1.76 for 1970 to 1979, 1.77 for 1980 to 1989, 2.22 for 1990 to 1999, 2.90 for 2000 to 2009, and 3.14 for 2010 to 2014. Comparison of 2010-2014 data to each decade found significance ( $p = .001$ ) for 1960 to 1969, 1970 to 1979, 1980 to 1989, and 1990 to 1999. No significance was found for 2000 to 2009.

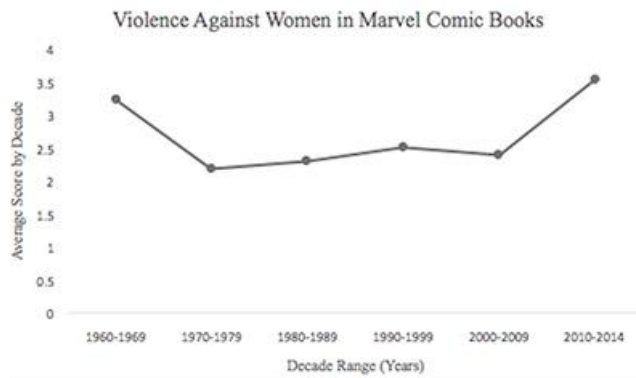
Female Sexualization is probably the indicator that fluctuated the most among the seven analyzed in the study. Scores went down during the 70's and the 80's, they stabilized on a fairly low score from 1999 to 2009 and then took off in the last period analyzed. This inconsistent behavior was probably caused by the presence of the Comic Book Code, which I have previously discussed, that was put in place in the 60's. Its purpose was to limit the violence and hyper-fetishization of the female body, but it resulted in a female representation of even lesser quality, with women being of very little relevance in stories. In the 80's creators had already started to work around the restraints of the Code and by the early 2000's most

publishing houses had already stopped adhering to the Code and since the beginning of 2011 it was officially considered obsolete. Following the complete repeal of the Code, “in the last decade, Marvel Comics has created more female title characters than ever before, and female readership is now over 46% of the market” (Jones, 2014). Hence, the increment in scores after 2010 can be attributed to these changes, both in social attitudes and inside the community of writers and artists. When talking about female sexualization in comic books it is worth to mention that women have historically been drawn in such absurd ways that a test was developed in order to check whether or not these female bodies could actually exist naturally without being horribly deformed. The Face-Off Test was used to determine the score of this sixth indicator in order to determine if the characters actually match a human anatomy and, sadly unsurprisingly, many of them would “lack full rib cages, internal organs, spines, or the ability to stand upright without being pulled over by their breasts”. It goes without saying that the higher a Comic Book would score in a Face-Off test, the higher it would score in the study I am referring to in this paragraph.



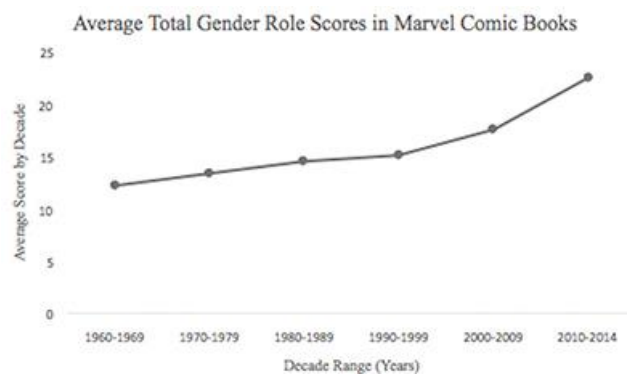
**Figure 6.** The average scores for this category were 1.88 for 1960 to 1969, 1.18 for 1970 to 1979, 1.35 for 1980 to 1989, 1.97 for 1990 to 1999, 1.97 for 2000 to 2009, and 3.53 for 2010 to 2014. Comparison of 2010-2014 data to each decade were significant ( $p = .001$ ) for all of the time periods between 1960 and 2009.

The last indicator, Violence Against Women, had a peculiar trend in which the scores from 1960 and the ones from 2014 were found to be essentially the same. It was lower throughout the other decades analyzed, but other than that it stayed consistent.



**Figure 7.** The average scores for this category were 3.22 for 1960 to 1969, 2.18 for 1970 to 1979, 2.31 for 1980 to 1989, 2.51 for 1990 to 1999, 2.39 for 2000 to 2009, and 3.32 for 2010 to 2014. Comparing 2010-2014 data to each decade found significance at  $p = .001$  for 1970 to 1979, 1980 to 1989, 1990 to 1999, and 2000 to 2009. No significance was found for 1960 to 1969.

“For the Average Total Female Gender Role Scores in Marvel Comics, this data seemed confirm its prediction. It was predicted that female gender roles in Marvel Comics in the last decade would become less stereotypical and more equitable as determined by the seven-point quantifiable rubric. As noted previously, the total female gender role rubric score went from 12.20 in 1960, slowly and steadily increasing through 1999, and then jumping to 17.58 in 2009, and rocketing to 22.50 in 2014.”<sup>65</sup> From 2010 to 2014, at no time in the history of the Marvel Universe have so many female comic book title characters been released, rebooted, and promoted<sup>66</sup>.



**Figure 8.** The average total decade scores for this category were 12.20 for 1960 to 1969, 13.41 for 1970 to 1979, 14.46 for 1980 to 1989, 15.15 for 1990 to 1999, 17.58 for 2000 to 2009, and 22.50 for 2010 to 2014. Comparing 2010 to 2014 data to each decade found significance ( $p = .001$ ) for all of the time periods between 1960 and 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Murphy, Katherine J., (2014) Analyzing Female Gender Roles in Marvel Comics from the Silver Age (1960) to the Present, *Student Pulse Journal Press*, available at [www.inquiriesjournal.com](http://www.inquiriesjournal.com).

<sup>66</sup>Fingerroth, David, (2014, July 17), Why Marvel needs a gimmick like Thor's sex change, *Time Magazine*, available at [time.com](http://time.com).



It can be therefore noted that the last few years have determined a strong increase in the quality of representation of women in comic books, with female characters being less stereotypical and more complex. Gender roles have progressively changed both in society and in media and the history of women in comic books can be effectively used as a way of documenting this shift.

### 2.3 Letter Columns in DC Comics as a Measure of Female Representation

The level of extensiveness in the study I have discussed in the previous paragraph could not be matched when it comes to the evolution of DC Comics. Therefore in this section I will cite different parameters to verify the increase in representation of women in DC Comics throughout the Ages Of Comic Books. Tim Hanley, in his *The Evolution of Female Readership - Letter Columns In Superhero Comics*<sup>67</sup>, used fan-written letters as a tool to determine how female readership changed during the history of comic books publications, which can in turn shed light on the level of representation of women.

In the last decade women have become more-and-more interested in comic books, constituting an ever increasing percentage of readers. In 2016 Marvel senior vice president David Gabriel affirmed that according to research, at least 40% of their readers was made of women, which is impressive, considering that less than ten years prior it would have probably barely made it to 10%.<sup>68</sup> This growth is partially caused by comic books being sold in well-known bookstores and online retailers, instead of being a prerogative of mostly niche comic book shops. Digital retailer Comixology 30% of their new customers in 2015 were women<sup>69</sup>. The truth is that a vast readership consisting of women is not exactly a recent development. When comic books became popular for the first time in the 1940's, their main target were children who read them indistinctively, regardless of gender<sup>70</sup>. However, when the wave of conservatory values made their comeback in the 50's, the superhero comic book industry faced some challenges, and their products became substantially more gender-targeted, with different genres belonging to different audiences. The result was that by the time that superheroes had gotten popular again in the 60's, they had already being written off as "boys stuff". However, with the beginning of the Silver Age it became popular to publish letter columns in superhero comic books and it remained common practice well into the 90's. Since the Silver Age saw a change in demographic, shifting from children to teenagers and young adults, the letters received became more complex and longer, with real, high-quality feedback. Samples of these letters were published every

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Goodrum, Tara Prescott and Philip Smith (2018), *Gender and The Superhero Narrative*,. University Press of Mississippi (October 2, 2018)

<sup>68</sup> Greipp, Milton. ICv2 Interview: Marvel's David Gabriel. 16 August 2016

<sup>69</sup> MacDonald, Heidi, 9 October 2015, Graphic Novel Sales Hit \$460 Million in 2014 *Publishers Weekly*, available at [www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com).

<sup>70</sup> Biagi, Shirley and Kern-Foxworth, Marilyn. *Facing Difference: Race, Gender and Mass Media* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1997), p. 249. Lopes, Paul. *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 22.

month for more than thirty years and most of them were signed with the writers' names. Hence it is possible to analyze the readership of different comics titles by reading the letter column sections and determining the number of letters written by women, based on their names. Reconstructing the audience of comic books through the years means getting a sense of how audiences changed over time and in terms of gender<sup>71</sup> and, even though men were the vast majority of the ones appearing in letter columns, women have always been faithful followers of superhero comic books, especially of female-led ones.

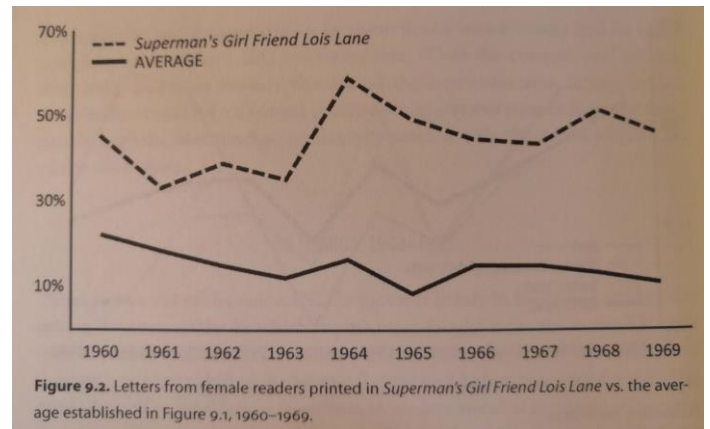
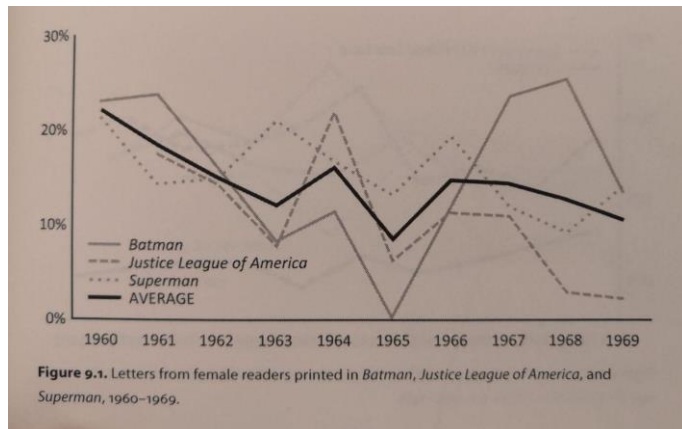
### 2.3.1 DC Comics letter columns from 1960 to 1969

Since this decade coincided with the beginning of the Silver Age, superheroes still dealt with inoffensive monsters and enemies, the readers were largely children and there was still not that much of a difference between genders when it came to readership. However, by the end of the decade this had already started to change and letter columns echoed this shift. In 1960 close to 20% of letters were written by women, but it decreased steadily during the following years and in 1969 it had halved, making 15% the average for the decade. Computing an average can be useful because since the female readership was so small, even one single letter written by a woman in an issue could make a big difference from year to year, without actually being of statistical relevance. Justice League of America is a good example of this. The number of female-written letters rose in 1964 with an apparent peak, but it fell again the following year, without establishing any real trends. It was different for Batman, whose female following grew over time, mainly because of the homonymous TV series starring Adam West and Burt Ward. The show had both boys and girls as a target and it kick-started the Bat-mania that characterized those years. The letters written by women rose from 12% in 1966 to 25% in 1966 and 1967, but they decreased again as the Bat-mania came to an end. It has to be noted that the three titles used in the study, Batman, Superman and Justice League of America, had almost exclusively male protagonists in this decade, with the only woman being Wonder Woman in the Justice League and, in 1969, Black Canary, who took the place of Diana on the team, changing nothing in terms of numbers. This prime example of Smurfette Syndrome meant that female readers had close to no characters that could appeal to them and this showed very clearly in letter columns. Female-led comic books displayed a completely reversed trend. When *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* came out in 1958 it immediately attracted a female audience and by the end of the 60's the percentage of letters written by women had gone up a lot. (Although it also might have simply meant that male readers had declined). What remains true is that at the end of the decade a definitely higher number of letters published in DC Comics letter columns were written by women. However, comics had progressively become more and more segregated, with girls reading series like *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* and boys following

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<sup>71</sup> The author of the article used Batman, Justice League of America and Superman as DC titles for the study, and analyzed them in a period of time spanning from the early 1960's to the late 1990's.

Superman's or Batman's adventures. It is not exactly clear whether columns reflected reality or if editor simply chose to publish letters that better addressed their chosen target, but the gender segregation that started in these years remained constant for a substantial amount of time.



### 2.3.2 Letter Columns from 1970 to 1979

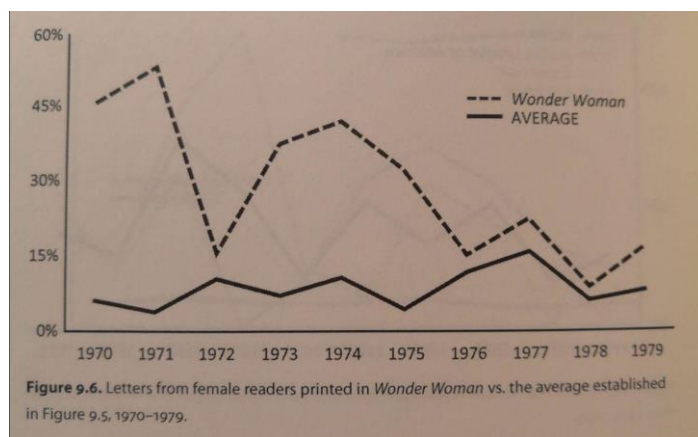
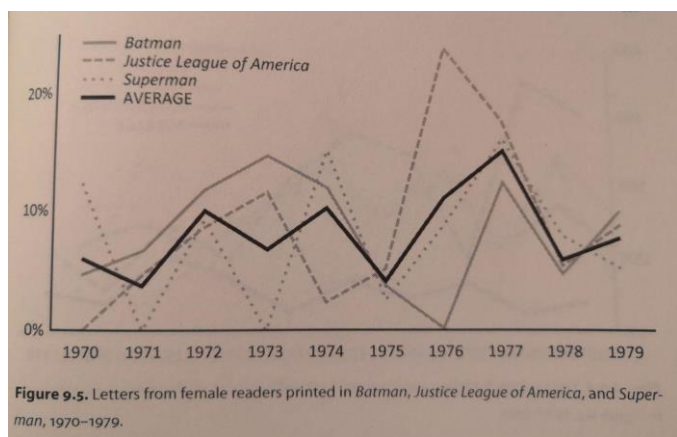
The 70's saw DC Comics attempting to conquer new horizons. They tried following the trend set by Marvel of targeting their comic books to an older audience, composed mostly by teenagers and young adults. Therefore the majority of series were changed and re-designed to appeal this new readership, with stories discussing more adult topics, such as current events and social issues<sup>72</sup>. Additionally, the company aimed at further diversifying their target, publishing an assortment of new titles and genres and initiating the so-called “DC Explosion”. However, it did not really go as planned and between the struggling American economy of those years and the increasing costs of production, DC Comics found itself completely unprepared and unable to sustain the “explosion”. What followed was the “DC Implosion”, during which DC ended up cancelling or merging half of their comic book production.

This high level of unrest inside the company was reflected by the letter columns, where the average of female readers during the 70's was of 8%, notably lower than in the 60'. The average however hides very scattered data. Superman, Batman and Justice League of America all had many ups and downs, with occasional peaks, but also whole years without a single published letter being written by a woman. The few letters that were published often complimented the creators<sup>73</sup>, shedding light on how men at DC Comic really saw their female audience. The only identifiable trend was the one that saw printed letters written by women grow from 1970 to 1977. Although undeniable, the growth was modest at best, and with the Implosion in 1978 it all came crashing down.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, Bradford W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p. 233-234.

<sup>73</sup> In 1976, assistant editor Bob Rozakis decided to run an all-female letter column in #127 of Justice League of America, in response to a story in which writers Cary Bates and Elliot S! Maggin appeared as characters. Rozakis called the column “Ladies’ Day in the JLA Mailroom”. Many of the letter writers proclaimed their attraction to Maggin, calling him handsome, sweet and kind.

The series that had a much clearer trend, though disheartening, was Wonder Woman. At the beginning of the 70's, her character had been rewritten as simply human Diana Prince, instead of being the classic superpower-endowed Amazon princess. However, when Ms. Magazine claimed Wonder Woman as a feminist icon in 1972, Diana soon went back to being the princess of Temischyra. She even became a TV star, in a series with Lynda Carter interpreting the Amazing Amazon. The idea was surely to replicate what had worked pretty well with Batman, but once again it did not really go as planned. The show aired from 1975 to 1979 and the letters from female fans published in letter columns actually decreased steadily throughout those years, with male readers actually predominating. In the 60's Wonder Woman had been largely followed by women, who made up well over half of the writers of letter columns. The 70's brought about change in Wonder Woman just as much as in all other publications, but since it used to have such a strong female fandom, the contrast was even more stark. On average only 27% of letters in Wonder Woman letter columns were from women, less than half of the whopping 61% of the previous decade and they dropped again during the Implosion, probably because with all that happened at DC in that period, any casual or new reader that might have been interested in the series was turned away by all the confusion and at the end of the decade the remaining aficionados were largely men. When the most famous female superhero in history managed to lose most of her female followers it was clear that DC had a serious issue with targeting a female fan-base. Not even the attention brought to the character by Ms. Magazine was enough. What seems clear is that after the Implosion, DC was really trying its best to sell what they had left, but catering to the other half of the population clearly was not their strong suit.

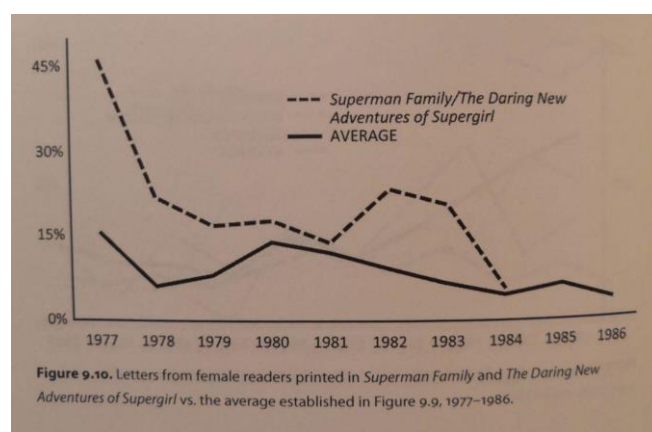
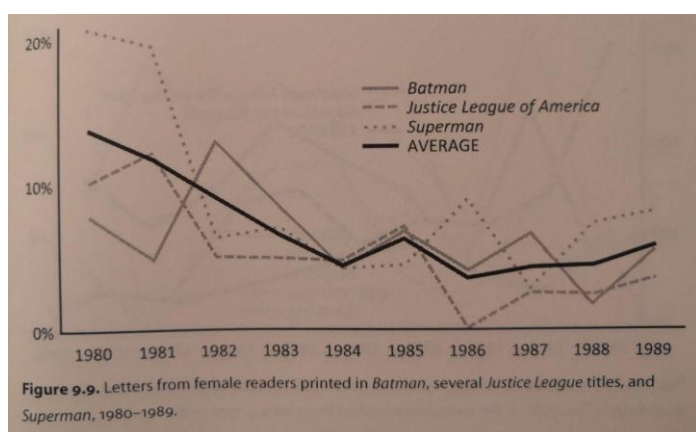


### 2.3.3 Letter Columns from 1980 to 1989

The 80's were a complicated period for DC Comics and a definitely dark one when it comes to female readership and representation. First of all, comic books started to be almost exclusively sold in specialized shops that were categorized as “places for boys”, furthering the gender segregation that had started in the previous decades. Moreover, the 80's saw a new shift in genre and target. Stories tackled even

more mature themes and the industry almost completely moved on from children and added young (male) adults to the intended readership. This translated to comic book becoming darker and more violent, with *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* being prime examples. Considering this premise, it does not really come as a surprise that the female presence in letter column declined even further in this decade. The overall percentage of female-written letters was 7% and 5% if we take into account only the second half of the decade. The lack of women in letter columns was so apparent that in 1988 a woman wrote to Superman inquiring as why so few letters written by women were being published, to which editor Mike Carlin simply admitted that most of the letter they received were from men<sup>74</sup>. Superman did receive an unusually high number of letters from women (20% circa in 1980 and 1981) but it was short-lived and mostly attributed to the release of *Superman: The Movie* in late 1978 and *Superman II* in 1981.

To remain in the Superman universe, in 1982 *The Daring New Adventures of Supergirl* was launched, following the college life of Superman's cousin Linda Danvers aka Kara Zor-El, the last daughter of Krypton. The series helped raising the percentages of female following of DC Comics in the 80's, but it was short-lived. A woman, Mary Lou Schnell Mayfield, wrote to the editors saying "Keep it up and I'll be reading more than Supergirl!"<sup>75</sup>, but DC failed to meet the expectation and the series was cancelled just two years later, in 1984. Moreover, it has to be kept in mind that not only was the new dark direction in comic books unfriendly towards a female audience, but also much of the violence was towards women. When in 1985 DC decided to merge all their universes, publishing *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, many of the female characters met unfortunate fates. Supergirl was killed, Batwoman, aka Barbara Gordon, was left paralyzed and Black Canary was tortured. The series was ultimately a success for DC, but it definitely alienated female fans even more.



### 2.3.4 Letter Columns from 1990 to 1999

<sup>74</sup> Editorial response to Kelly Hong, unnamed letter column, *Superman #15* (New York: DC Comics, 1988)

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Mary Lou Schnell Mayfield, unnamed letter column, *The Daring New Adventures of Supergirl #9* (New York: DC Comics, 1983)

Following *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, DC Comics realized the power of crossover events, which started with *The Death of Superman* in 1992. However, these events required an extensive knowledge of the DC universe, meaning that they catered to die-hard fans rather than occasional readers and since the company had spent the previous decades building a readership of young adult men, diverging from this trend was far from easy. During the 90's, women wrote in slightly higher numbers compared to the 80's, but remained a strong minority and conscious of being so. In 1994 Denise Petet wrote a letter published on an issue of *Justice League of America* saying "As one of a very small minority of female readers, it is terrific to see more dominant female characters"<sup>76</sup>. It is clear that the woman knew who these stories were really written for, no matter how many women were present in the series. From 1990 to 1999, only 8% of letters were written by women<sup>77</sup>. The numbers did go up slightly towards the end of the decade, but in the late 90's writing letters to comics publishers had become way less frequent, causing samples to be smaller and making it harder to draw reliable conclusions on female participation.

The only series that was enthusiastically followed by women was *Catwoman*, published for the first time in 1993, widely because of the success obtained by Michelle Pfeiffer's interpretation of the character on *Batman Returns* (1992). In full-on Plastic Age fashion, Catwoman aka Selina Kyle was dressed in skimpy clothes and drawn with exaggerated and hyper-sexualized features, clearly meant for the (heterosexual) male gaze. On this matter, popular culture historian Jeffrey A. Brown wrote that "huge, gravity-defying breasts, mile-long legs, perpetually pouting lips, and perfectly coifed big hair" were "part of a larger cultural system of fetishization within an iconography of pinups and soft porn"<sup>78</sup>. Her characterization did attract some critiques from female readers like Shelby C. Pankratz who wrote "My complaint is that Catwoman's chest looks completely out of proportion. For a person who relies on balance and agility like she does, you'd think those huge protrusions would interfere tremendously"<sup>79</sup>. Or Laura McLellan who, in another issue of the series, wrote "Please reconsider your stand on how Selina's body is drawn. [. . .] By filling comic books with women whose bodies are consistently out of proportion, you are simply encouraging more women to have poor self-images and unrealistic ideas about how they should look."<sup>80</sup>. However, despite this kind of commentary, *Catwoman* attracted a large number of female fans and the female-written letters in the columns reached an average of 25% throughout the decade, also considering that women did not have that much of a choice in the 90's if they wanted to read comic books with female leads. *Catwoman*, *Wonder Woman* and a revamped *Supergirl* were the only options that lasted more than a handful of issues.

It is no longer possible to assess the state of things with letter columns because with the turn of the millennium the letters written diminished rapidly and finally DC stopped publishing the columns completely. However, all in all the 90's ended in a somewhat positive way when it comes to female

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<sup>76</sup> Letter from Denise Petet, "Justice Log" *Justice League of America* #90 (New York: DC Comics, 1994)

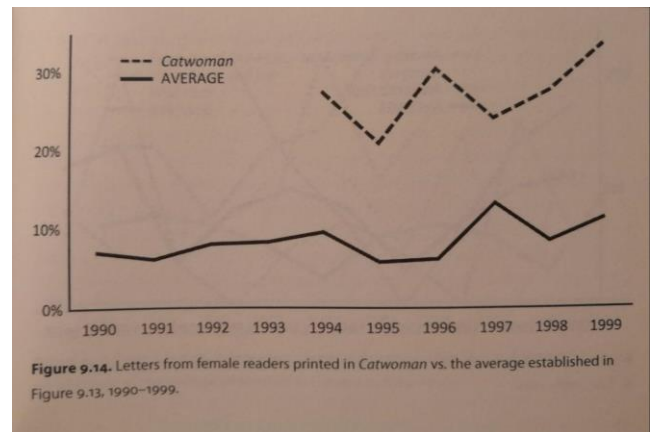
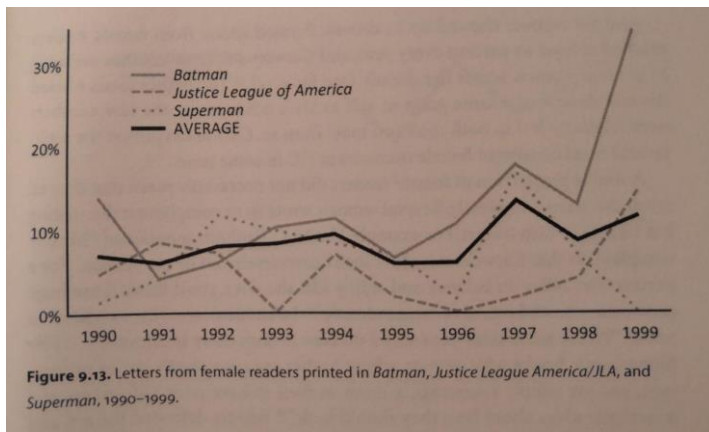
<sup>77</sup> Draper Carlson, Johanna, *Superhero Comic Reader Stats, Comics Worth Reading*, May 10, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, Jeffrey A., *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011, p. 55-56.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Shelby C. Pankratz, unnamed letter column, *Catwoman* #6 (New York: DC Comics, 1994)

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Laura McLellan, unnamed letter column, *Catwoman* #12 (New York: DC Comics, 1994)

readership of DC. It got better in the following years, leading to today's strong female readership that comic books currently have.



What appears absolutely clear from this study is that no matter how small, comic books have always had a following made of women who were increasingly driven away by publishers who had absolutely no idea on how to cater to them, but who also failed in eliminating them completely. The idea that comic books were exclusively “boys stuff” was proven wrong again and again throughout the decades. What also appears unquestionably evident is that women become easily interested in superhero stories that present female protagonists and having female writers and artists certainly helps even more. Today's Dc (and Marvel) female readership is probably at the highest it's ever been and it is most likely due to the fact that there has never been such a large number of female-lead comic books. DC sports nineteen titles with women as protagonists<sup>81</sup>, which equals to almost a quarter of the total line of comic books offered by the company. Women were never absent from comic books fandom, they were simply neglected for decades. And it cannot be just a coincidence that now that women are a strong and reliable part of the comics demographic, the comic book industry is fairly stable, after years of diminishing sales. Publishers are finally realizing that superheroes can be targeted to everyone and, be it a market strategy or a conscious progressive choice, it is certainly changing things for the better.

## 2.4 Final data regarding levels of gender equality in comic books

Following the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017, the topic of female superheroes and representation has gone back to being at the forefront of heated discussion. We know that Wonder woman has had her history of being a feminist icon since Ms. Magazine declared her as such, but seeing her on the big screen has prompted many to even claim that we are witnessing a whole new era of superheroes. It is most likely too soon to really prove if this is right, but what is undeniable is that, as I have mentioned before, the number

<sup>81</sup> DC Comics Full May 2017 Solicitations, source *Newsarama*, available at [www.newsarama.com](http://www.newsarama.com), February 21, 2017.

of strong, complex female characters has never been as high as in the last decade. However, even though the relationship between comic books and women has never been better, it is surely not the best. As of 2017, only 26.7% of all the Marvel and DC characters *combined* were women and many of them are often sexualized or made victims of unnecessary violence. Moreover, even though there is an equal amount of male and female comic book characters with superpowers, the type of powers they have follows a clear gender bias. There are 7.69% more men with superhuman strength than women and 6.73% more women with superhuman agility than men. Following the same line of thought, male superheroes are more likely to have unhuman stamina and berserker strength<sup>82</sup>. Objects, too are apparently a very male-oriented characteristic. Even though Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth and bracelets are as iconic as the character herself, male characters have gadgets 5.85% more than females, they own power suits and power items more frequently<sup>83</sup>. And to add insult to injury, the gender pay gap is alive and well in comic books as well, considering that out of all super-rich superheroes, 6.80% are men and 5.34% are women. In general, powers that are less physical, like empathy, intellect and telepathy, are more common among female characters, while men tend to have physical powers and gadgets. The few physical powers that are a prerogative of female characters fall easily in gender stereotyping, like pheromone control, "the ability to generate and control pheromones that affect emotional and physical states, such as sleep, fear, and pleasure", which occurs five times as often in female characters<sup>84</sup>.

Inequality between genders is apparent in superhero teams as well. Between Marvel and DC there are more than 2500 teams and half of all characters are part of at least one of them, regardless of gender. Obviously, since the total number of female characters is a lot lower than that of male ones, it comes without saying that there are not that many women on the teams. Not only that, they are also unevenly distributed. 30% of teams are all-male ones and only 12% have more women than men. This last piece of data is also incomplete if it is not specified that most of the teams in that 12% are all-female ones. In reality, only 4.8% of super-teams are mixed in terms of gender and also have more women than men. Even the names of the teams are clearly influenced by gender stereotypes. A third of all teams composed of only women have names that somehow allude to femininity, half if the team has more than five women on it: Femizons, Lady Liberators, Female Furies, Holiday Girls, Doom Maidens. Meanwhile, only 7% of all-male teams have names related to their masculinity.

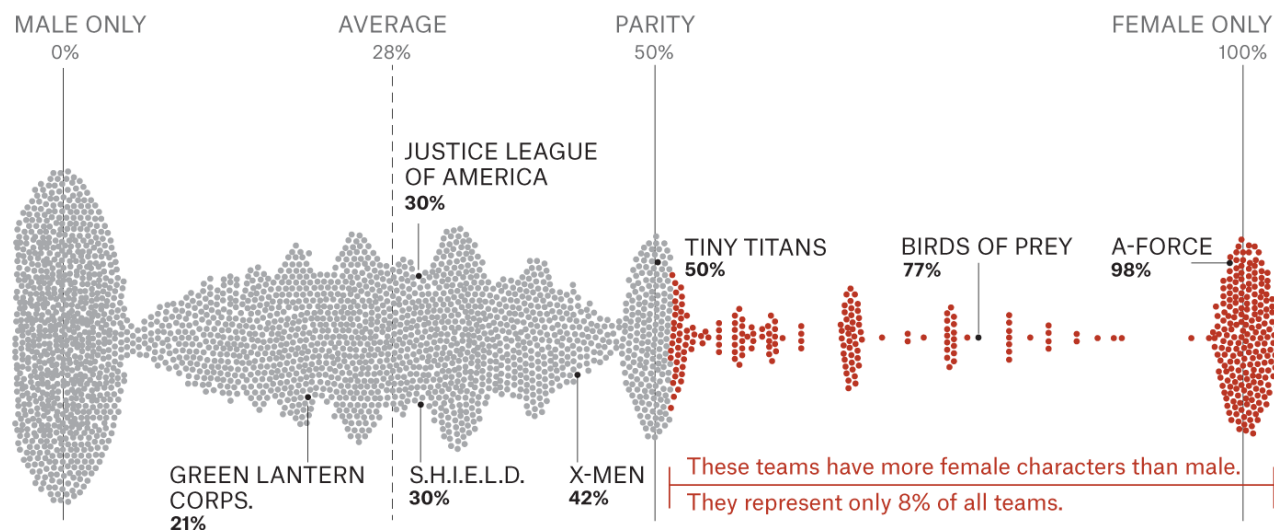
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<sup>82</sup> The destructive kind, like Hulk's

<sup>83</sup> Think of how immediately recognizable Thor's hammer and Iron Man's suit are

<sup>84</sup> To see the data regarding the difference in male and female superpowers it is possible to check the corresponding graph on the following article: <https://pudding.cool/2017/07/comics/>





The days of superheroes only living their adventures through the pages of comic books are long gone. Marvel and DC Comics are multimillionaire companies producing record-breaking blockbusters and fortunate TV series. In this reality, representation of women is fundamental, because new patterns can be spread in pop culture with a resonance that was not possible until very recently. This is why it is so important that female superheroes, albeit limited in number, portray real, complex characters. “If the constantly repeated story is that women and girls are not leaders, are not working in professional settings, are not agents of their own lives but merely adjuncts to others, and are sometimes not even present at all, it can reinforce or foster societal undervaluing of women and girls... As there are fewer female characters to begin with, each is overburdened with representing women as a group.”<sup>85 86</sup>

The last two years, however, do seem to have launched us into a new era of female representation and superheroes. *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) were released and despite all the fuss created by anti-feminists and petty comments, they both exceeded all expectations in terms of success. The two films also proved what was actually not that hard to imagine: women *do* actually enjoy superheroes stories when their opinions, perceptions and points of view are taken into account throughout the development of said stories. In the next chapter I will analyze more in depth the two movies and I will attempt to determine the quality of women’s representation that the two brought about.

### 3. Analyzing and comparing *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) in a framework of media representation of female superheroes

#### 3.1 Introduction

<sup>85</sup> Cocca, Carloyn (2016), *Superwomen: Gender, Power and Representation*. Bloomsbury Academic

<sup>86</sup> Shendruk, Amanda, *Analyzing the Gender Representation of 34,476 Comic Book Characters*, in *The Pudding* 2017, available at [pudding.cool](http://pudding.cool).

In the previous chapters I have discussed the history of female superheroes throughout history and reported studies on female representation in the media when it comes to superheroes. In this final chapter I will attempt using the seven values adopted by Katherine J. Murphy in her 2014 study<sup>87</sup> to analyze two recent movies in order to gauge the quality of representation of women portrayed in the two. The values are: Average Cover Art, Bechdel Test, Storyline, Occupation, Balance of Power, Female Sexualization and Violence against women. Since these categories were developed to study comic books and I am adapting them to movies, I will replace Average Cover Art with Average Film Poster Art. All of these will be rated on a score from 0 to 5. The original study was carried out by professionals whose experience and efficiency surely and greatly surpass mine. However, I will do my best to be as objective as possible in my own analysis.

The first movie in question is *Wonder Woman*, released in 2017, distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures and produced by DC Entertainment in association with RatPac Entertainment and Chinese company Tencent Pictures. It was directed by Patty Jenkins from a screenplay by Allan Heinberg and a story written by Heinberg, Zack Snyder and Jason Fuchs. The second movie is *Captain Marvel*, released in 2019, distributed by Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures and produced by Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige. It was written and directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, with Geneva Robertson-Dworet aiding in the realization of the screenplay.

## 3.2 Wonder Woman

### 3.2.1 Movie Summary

The character of Wonder Woman lived through decades of published issues and many storyline changes. Because of this, the movie creators had a lot of options they could choose from in order to write a plot. They settled on telling the story of Diana of Themischa, princess of the Amazons and biological daughter of queen Hippolyta and the Zeus, although Diana remains unaware of the identity of her father until much further into the movie. Through Queen Hippolyta the audience learns that Ares tried to kill all humanity and killed all the gods that tried to oppose him except from Zeus, who used all the power he had left to wound Ares enough to make him retreat temporarily. Before dying, Zeus managed to leave the Amazons, invested with the duty of protecting mankind, a weapon called “Godkiller” and the island of Themischa so that they could prepare for Ares’s return and defeat him. In 1918 a man, US pilot Captain Steve Trevor crashes his plane in the waters close to Themischa. He is rescued by Diana, but German troops soon follow him and attack the Amazons. The latter manage to defeat the soldiers, but Antiope, Diana’s aunt

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<sup>87</sup> See chapter 2.2

and trainer, loses her life in battle to save her niece. After the attack, Steve is interrogated with the Lasso of Truth and the Amazons find out about the war happening outside of Temischyra and that Trevor is an Allied spy. He was on the run after stealing a notebook belonging to chemist Dr. Isabel Maru, who is developing a much deadlier version of mustard gas. She follows the orders of General Erich Ludendorff. Diana decides to leave the island because she believes that Ares is behind the violence and wants to stop him. Therefore she takes her iconic armor, the Lasso of Truth and the “Godkiller” sword and follows Trevor back into Man’s World. They arrive in London and bring Dr. Maru’s notebook to the Supreme War Council where they find Sir Patrick Morgan who is trying to negotiate an armistice with Germany. Thanks to Diana who deciphers Maru’s notes they find out that the German forces plan to release the gas on the Western Front. Steve is forbidden from acting by his commander, but Morgan secretly gives him the funds to recruit some men and leave for the front. The Captain puts together a team composed of Sameer, a spy, Charlie, a sniper, and Chief Napi, a smuggler and together with Diana they leave for Belgium, where the front is located. Diana walks through No Man’s Land and, unharmed by bullets, reaches the enemy trenches and captures it, therefore liberating the village of Veld. After celebrating their victory, the team discovers that a gala will be held at a German High Command which is close to their location. Diana and Steve therefore infiltrate the event. He plans to find the gas and destroy it, while she wants to locate and kill general Ludendorff, who she believes to be Ares, convinced that doing so will end the war. However, Steve stops her because not doing so would threaten his mission, but this leads to Ludendorff discharging the gas on Veld and killing all its inhabitants. Diana attributes the responsibility of the tragedy to Steve and she follows Ludendorff to a facility where the gas is being loaded on a plane that is supposed to go to London and release its mortal cargo onto the city. Diana fight Ludendorff and kills him, but she finds herself profoundly confused and disappointed when she discovers that his death did not in fact stop the war. Finally, Sir Patrick Morgan reveals himself as Ares and tells Diana that he did in fact inspire the feelings behind the actions of humans, like using Ludendorff and Maru to do his dirty work, but ultimately people themselves decided to turn to violence and war. She tries to kill him with her sword “Godkiller”, but he destroys the weapon and reveals to her that she herself is “Godkiller” being Zeus’s and Hippolyta’s daughter. He offers her to become his ally, destroy mankind and bring paradise back to Earth, but she refuses and they fight. Meanwhile, Steve destroys Maru’s laboratory and then hijacks the bomber loaded with the gas and sacrifices himself flying it to a safe altitude and detonating it. Ares attempts using Diana’s grief and have her kill Dr. Maru, but her experiences with Steve and the rest of the team have convinced of people’s goodness and she spares the chemist and finally kills Ares. She goes on to fighting for Man’s World, believing that love is the only force capable of saving the world.

### 3.2.2 Analysis of the movie based on the seven categories by Katherine J. Murphy

For what concerns Average Film Poster Art, I have opted for a score of 4 out of 5. Each poster portrays Diana in positions that are not overly sexualized. They do not show her body excessively and she is always shown in power stances that make her look powerful and fierce. The reason why I have decided to not give this category a perfect score is that Wonder Woman's armor is not exactly something that would be considered useful or appropriate on a battlefield, considering that her short skirt and revealing corset do not leave much to the imagination. To be fair, her costume is iconic and it has remained more or less the same since the 40's. Wonder Woman's armor, together with her Lasso of Truth are among the most recognizable superhero gadgets. Additionally, the skirt is longer in the movie, compared to earlier depictions of the character. Overall, the posters showed a strong woman, often standing in position that are usually reserved to men and, despite the revealing clothing, she is still portrayed in less objectifying ways than a large part of female characters.

Regarding the Bechdel Test, I give the movie a score of 3 of 5. The movie presents some peculiarities that make scoring this value a complex matter. As a matter of fact, *Wonder Woman* does pass the Bechdel Test, but it does so in a way that is not really satisfying. This is because the movie is essentially divided in two parts: the one set on the island of Themischa and the one set in "Man's World". Since the population of Themischa is exclusively female, it comes without saying that all the interactions between the characters living on the island are enough to satisfy the requirements of the test. However, when Diana leaves the island and enters our world, all female characters essentially disappear, leaving her to be the only woman in a group of men. The fact that this section of the movie takes place during World War I is not exactly an excuse to make women vanish from the set, considering that the battlefield is not the only place where characters interact. Following her departure from her world, Diana only speaks to another woman once and it is when she meets Steve Trevor's secretary. Therefore, essentially, the requisites for the Bechdel Test are met in the first section of the movie, but after these initial forty minutes, most female characters except the protagonist leave the screen for good. This strong division can also be interpreted as a conscious decision from the directors and screenwriters to represent the detachment Diana experiences when she finds herself in our world, but the final result still stands and I cannot find myself capable of giving a higher score for this particular category.

When it comes to storyline, *Wonder Woman* can be considered satisfying and I have decided to give it a perfect score of 5 out of 5. And beyond that, this movie represents a shift that happened in superhero movies, and in film in general, when it comes to representing female characters. *Wonder Woman* was the first superhero movie with a woman as protagonist portrayed on the big screen. Diana's storyline is interesting. She goes from being an unaware and hardheaded young woman who is trained to be a great warrior, but who knows very little about war and the world, to being an extremely powerful character, who never loses either her humanity or her compassion in the process. "Power. Grace. Wisdom. Wonder" was the slogan appearing on the posters before the movie was released and it did not disappoint. Diana is portrayed as a strong woman, and her sensitivity, her compassion, the absolute delight she shows when seeing a baby

for the first time in London, they are all parts of her strength and she is never blamed or ridiculed for believing in the goodness of people. When shell-shocked sniper Charlie panics and confesses that he thinks he should leave because he is afraid of being a burden, Diana simply says “But who will sing to us, Charlie?” and comforts him with respect and tenderness. These are exactly her strengths and she is portrayed as a role model for anyone, including men. The men she befriends are inspired by her, they wish to be more like her and they treat her as their equal. Diana’s storyline is one of personal growth and she faces many challenges, but despite her painful experiences, she comes out still believing in people. Even grief is not enough to make her turn to “the dark side” even though it is such a common trope with grieving characters. Occupation is a complex value. Diana is a princess until she leaves Temischyra, but being a princess is not exactly a nine-to-five job. Most male superheroes have very recognizable occupations. They are doctors, scientists or reporters and their secret identities are shown to be strongly connected to their daily jobs<sup>88</sup>. With female characters it has traditionally been quite different. Up until the last couple of decades most women in comic books, even if they were superheroes, they mostly had very stereotypical occupations. They were mothers, girlfriends, wives and little more. With Wonder Woman the situation is different because she holds the status of being essentially a demi-goddess, the princess of a people made of women warriors with a duty to protect humanity from evil forces. Diana being the princess of Temischyra is such an iconic element to the character of Wonder Woman that giving her any other kind of “real identity” would have ended up lacking continuity. Since the movie is set during World War I, the creators could afford to show us Diana on the battlefield as Wonder Woman and Diana in her own home in Temischyra, without the need to really show her having a “normal” job in Man’s World. However, they decided to actually give her a visible occupation and an important one at that. Under the name of Diana Prince, she is the director of the Louvre Museum in Paris. The audience learns this because she is shown at her desk both at the beginning and at the end of the movie and there is no doubt on what her occupation is. Of course, this job of hers does not have much screen time, but after all the movie is an origin story. Therefore I have decided to rate this category as 4 out of 5. It is not perfect, but I believe it to be as close to perfect as possible, considering the canon origin of the character of Wonder Woman.

The fifth indicator is Balance of Power. The score I have opted for is a 4 out of 5. When it comes to this value there are some complications that are similar to the ones present in the evaluation with respect to the Bechdel Test. Since the movie is divided in two sections, the first one with exclusively female characters and the second one with a majority of male ones, assessing the level of balance of power between men and women is not a straightforward matter. Surely all the Amazons are highly respected as characters, both within the plot and in the eyes of the audience. However, with Diana as obvious exception, the Amazons never really interact with men on screen. Diana finds herself affected by a sort of well-disguised Smurfette Syndrome. She surely is portrayed as a respected leader and her male teammates appreciate her both as a

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<sup>88</sup> Unless we are talking about Bruce Wayne. His name is so important and well known that he is just as respected both as the Wayne heir and as Batman. Or maybe he does not need a daily job because he is just *that* rich.

person and as their commander, but she is the only woman they have ever taken orders from and she needs to gain their trust. She needs to show them, prove that she is capable of doing exactly what they can. She does so in an ever so frequent fight scene in which she easily wins against a random man who tries to attack the group. “She’s not like the other girls”, she is strong, she can fight. Obviously, considering the level of gender equality in 1918, it is not that unrealistic, but it is still overdone in the film industry. What is true is that the contrast between her world and ours is a big part of the plot. The fact that people are corruptible, imperfect and often make bad decisions pains and confuses Diana and she does not understand the fallibility of mankind exactly because she is not part of it. When she finally understands it, her journey of personal growth is completed. In this context it is understandable why the creators needed to have her face sexism as well, which is why I still decided to give this category an almost perfect score. It is also important to point out that the movie completely overturns a very common trope, the “Women in Refrigerators” one. Instead of having a female character die so that her sacrifice can move the male protagonist’s storyline forward, in *Wonder Woman* it is the man who sacrifices himself to further her plot. And not only that, but instead of having an identity crisis and going full-on revenge mode, she took a moment to manifest her anger and pain without harming anyone and then decided to still do good and refused to let her grief take over.

When talking about Sexualization, we find ourselves in a delicate situation once again. I have opted for a score of 4 out of 5, but deciding for a specific score is far from being a straightforward matter. The fact that sex sells is no mystery and the film industry has used sex as a marketing tool for the longest time. The problem lies in the extreme imbalance between the sexualization of the female body and that of the male one. The world of comic books and superheroes, however, has had a fairly peculiar history concerning this matter. Superheroes, whether male or female, have always been fairly sexualized, with their skin-tight super-suits and not-quite-protecting armor. The point, however, is that no matter the gender, for the majority of their history superheroes have been the product of male fantasies. Female superheroes represent the “ideal” partner, while male superheroes represent the “ideal” body or social status. In the realm of superheroes, however, the opinions and desires of women have been ignored for the longest time. Only in the last few years there has been a shift to taking into consideration women’s interests as well. This is the framework in which *Wonder Woman* came about. Diana has always been portrayed as sexy and in the 2017 adaptation she surely remains a very feminine, conventionally attractive woman. After all the winner of Miss Israel was casted to interpret her. What I perceive as different in this movie is not really that Diana is seen as sexually attractive, but how her attractiveness is mostly complimented instead of used as a tool to belittle her. Diana is a beautiful woman, but nobody is disrespectful to her because of it and the ones who try to be are immediately and very distinctively coded as villains. Steve is constantly in awe of her, the other men of the team have their own demons to worry about and they just appreciate her beauty in its complexity, rather than just ogling her physique. Moreover, Steve is shown as vulnerable and naked more than she is. The movie plot involves Diana and Steve developing a romance, but it is never too tacky or overdone and there is one essential element to it that makes it stand out among the other countless examples: Steve is a man women

can *actually* fantasize about. He is good looking, sure, but what makes him attractive is the fact that he is sweet and caring and respectful. He is not soaked in toxic masculinity, he never resorts to violence unless it is absolutely necessary and when he does he does not enjoy it at all. When he punches a man in the face while in London with Diana, he actually winces in pain and shakes the hand he used to strike because it hurts. He never feels emasculated by the fact that Diana protects him more than he protects her. In a very unusual fashion when it comes to superheroes, *Wonder Woman* actually caters to women and concerns itself with what women might enjoy watching, rather than just showing Gal Gadot's long legs in a mini skirt and calling it a day. It is undeniable that the movie is still partially catered to the male gaze, but it still managed to break a number of stereotypes and it deserves to be praised for it.

The last category is Violence Against Women. In this case I have elected to assign a score of 5 out of 5. *Wonder Woman* cannot exactly be classified as a violent movie for today's standards, but it is in fact set during World War I and a certain degree of violence is part of the plot. However, violence towards women is not really present and more significantly, it is not used as shocking value. What makes violence towards women in media so insufferable is the fact that it is used to shock the audience and little else. There is no real reason as to why women are so often brutalized in media aside from the fetishization of the violence itself. Gratuitous violence towards men is essentially absent from the media, aside from occasional and very niche productions<sup>89</sup>, which ultimately proves that women being constant victims has a lot more to do with sexism and misogyny than with the art of filmmaking. In *Wonder Woman* this does not really happen. There are essentially two death scenes in the movie: The one of Antiope in the beginning and Steve's. Both characters are framed as heroes and they die to protect Diana. Neither of their sacrifices are pointless and they both get the recognition they deserve. The violence Diana faces is that of war where there are no real winners. There is essentially no brutalization or excessive and unjustified violence towards women in the movie.

The overall score I have attributed to the movie, based on the analysis of these seven categories is therefore 4 out of 5. Although it presents some issues, *Wonder Woman* did open the new era of superhero movies with female protagonists and it did so as best as it could. Being the first one means having a lot of responsibility and I believe the production managed to successfully represent a character that has been a feminist icon for fifty years.

### 3.3 Captain Marvel

#### 3.3.1 Movie Summary

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<sup>89</sup> The most relevant example is probably *Jennifer's Body* (2009) dir. Karyn Kusama, which is a horror movie, making it fairly inaccessible to a large public by default. Additionally, it regained popularity in 2018 in the wake of the #MeToo campaign, which turned it in a sort of feminist cult movie, but it was never truly successful.

Two years after the release of DC's *Wonder Woman*, Marvel published its first movie with a female protagonist: *Captain Marvel*. The company opted for telling the story of Carol Danvers, roughly as it has been since 2012 when Kelly Sue DeConnick started writing about Carol being the seventh and latest incarnation of the strongest avenger: Captain Marvel. The movie is a prequel to the *Infinity Saga* of the MCU and it is therefore set before the Avengers were even considered as a possibility, in 1995. It starts on Hala, the planet that serves as capital of the Kree<sup>90</sup> Empire. Here, a member of the Starforce named Vers is troubled with amnesia and persistent nightmares about an older woman unknown to her. Vers is trained by Yon-Rogg, who is both her commander and mentor, in order to control her powers. The Kree are ruled by an artificial intelligence called the Supreme Intelligence who strongly advises a hot-headed Vers to control her emotions. Vers, Yon-Rogg and the rest of their team are sent on a mission to rescue one of their operatives who is undercover in a group of Skrull.<sup>91</sup> However, Vers ends up being captured by Talos, the Skrull commander. Since Skrull are mind-readers, they search in Vers's mind for clues and some of her memories lead them to Earth, but she does not know why those memories are in her head, because she has no knowledge of them. On Earth Vers manages to escape her capturers, but she lands in Los Angeles making quite the noise, which attracts S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents Nick Fury and Phil Coulson are interrupted by the Skrull on their mission to find out who she is. A chasing sequence ensues, Vers manages to recover a crystal that contains the memories extracted from her and Fury finds out about the Skrull ability to shapeshift when he kills one of the aliens who had obtained Coulson's appearance. However, Talos disguises himself as Keller, who is Fury's boss and orders him to team up with Vers and observe her. Vers uses the memories extracted from her by the Skrull, which lead her and Fury to the Project Pegasus installation a base of the U.S. Air Force. Here they find out that she was actually a human pilot who was presumed dead after a plane crash in 1989. The accident happened while she was testing a new light-speed engine invented by Dr. Wendy Lawson. Vers also realizes that the doctor is also the woman who appears in her nightmares. Agent Fury communicates to S.H.I.E.L.D. where they are, but unknowingly leads Talos, who is still disguised as Keller, to their location. However, Fury manages to discover Talos's stunt and helps Vers to steal a cargo jet and escape the aliens. Together with Dr. Lawson's cat named Goose, they fly to Louisiana in order to meet with the last person who had seen both Vers and the Doctor alive: retired pilot Maria Rambeau. Thanks to Maria and her daughter Monica, Vers find out that she is actually Carol Danvers and that before losing her memories she was basically family to the two. They are later visited by an unarmed Talos, who explains the truth: the Skrull are refugees and they never started the war with the Kree. They just want a new home and Dr. Lawson was actually a dissident Kree scientist called Mar-Vell who was trying to help the Skrull and end the war. Talos helps Carol remember what happened during the plane crash and she remembers how the Doctor was actually killed by Yon-Rogg before she could destroy the engine she had designed. In order to stop the Kree from obtaining the engine, Carol destroyed it herself and got invested by the resulting

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<sup>90</sup> The Kree are a race of aliens who have been a part of the Marvel Universe for a long time. They first appeared in the late 60's on the pages of *The Fantastic Four* and since then a number of superheroes have interacted with the Kree.

<sup>91</sup> Skrulls are another race of aliens. They are shapeshifters and mind-readers and they are at war with the Kree.



explosion. However, her body absorbed the energy released by the explosion and gained her powers, but she also lost her memory. The team composed by Carol, Talos, Nick Fury and Maria Rambeau manage to find a laboratory hidden by Dr. Lawson. It is a small, cloaked satellite orbiting around Earth in which the Doctor hid a number of Skrulls, Talos's family included, and the Tesseract, which is the power source for the engine designed by Lawson. However, they are followed by the Starforce and Carol is captured. She is brought before the Supreme Intelligence with whom she speaks and argues. During the exchange Carol realizes that the implant the Kree had put on her was suppressing her powers. She removes it and she is finally free to use her full strength. A fight ensues during which Fury is able to retrieve the Tesseract and Goose the "cat" is revealed to actually be a Flerken, another kind of alien, who swallows the Tesseract to hide it. Meanwhile Ronan The Accuser, a Kree official, brings a whole army to attack and destroy Earth, but Carol easily destroys all the bombers and forces Ronan and his army to retreat. She then goes back to the ground where Yon-Rogg is waiting for her. She beats him easily as well and sends him back to Hala on a pod, telling him to deliver the message to the Supreme Intelligence that she intends to stop the war. Finally Carol leaves Earth to find the Skrull in their quest for a new home and leaves a pager to Fury so that he can contact her in case of a serious emergency. Fury subsequently decides to start a S.H.I.E.L.D project to find more heroes capable of protecting the planet in case of new attacks. He calls it "Avenger Initiative" after Carol's Air Force call sign.

### 3.3.2 Movie Analysis

When it comes to Average Film Poster Art *Captain Marvel* does just as good as *Wonder Woman* if not better. I give it a score of 5 out of 5. All the posters feature Carol in non-sexualized poses and every character is portrayed in the same position in their poster. The men pose exactly in the same way the women do and there is not a single woman who is wearing revealing clothing. Carol and the rest of the Kree Starforce wear the same unisex jumpsuits, Maria Rambeau wears a pilot suit and Dr. Lawson wears a simple brown leather bomber jacket. Carol's costume is practical and it does not really accentuate any of her physical features. In one of the posters she is shown in front of all the other characters, portrayed as the leader she is. In another one she poses in a superhero stance, fists clenched and glowing from her powers, with hangar doors behind her, which trace back to her past as a pilot. Overall the posters for *Captain Marvel* show what is probably the closest to perfect gender equality in this kind of media.

The movie passes the Bechdel Test completely. I therefore decided to give it a perfect score of 5 out of 5. Out of eight main characters<sup>92</sup>, there are four men and for women. Throughout the movie there are various instances in which two women are talking to each other and they do not talk about a man once.

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<sup>92</sup> Carol Danvers, Nick Fury, Talos, Maria Rambeau, Minn-Erva, Dr. Wendy Lawson, Phil Coulson, Yon-Rogg

There is literally no occasion in which the subject matter of a conversation between two female characters is a man. If *Wonder Woman* passed the Bechdel Test on a technicality, *Captain Marvel* absolutely aces it. Carol is a strong, determined woman whose mission is to save the world and she clearly does not need a male love interest to do so. Romance is completely left out of the picture and when Carol talks to other female characters they have more important things to say than to talk about men. Moreover, all the women in the cast are considered equal and they are never in petty competition with one another. Yes, Minn-Erva ends up being Carol's enemy, but they never resort to petty cat-fights when confronting each other. Carol's relationship with Nick Fury is one of the best representation of friendship between a man and a woman that Hollywood has ever seen. They are absolutely equal, they banter, they respect and trust each other. They also balance each other out when it comes to skills, which are never stereotypically gendered. Carol is the one who smashes through doors, while Fury leans more towards using his wits. As an endearing addendum, Fury is the one who finds and befriends Goose the "cat" in a very "unmanly" way, considering the standards usually portrayed in media. Finally, the most important relationship Carol has in the movie is the one with Maria Rambeau and her daughter Monica. Leaving the same-sex relationship undertones aside, Maria is Carol's best friend. She is the one who helps the hero reconnect with her past, the one who gives her a home to return to and a group of people to really call family. Maria is coded as Carol's real love source in the movie and whether it is just platonic or not does not really matter. All in all the interactions between women in *Captain Marvel* are just as relevant as the ones between men. The plot would make no sense if all scenes where women talk to each other were removed and the same cannot really be said about *Wonder Woman*.

Carol Danvers's Storyline can be considered as extremely satisfying and I therefore opted for a 5 out of 5 score. *Captain Marvel* took the road *Wonder Woman* paved and perfectly hit the mark. If the latter made room for female superheroes on the big screen for the first time, the former took it to the next level in many ways. These two movies together really do feel like the beginning of a new era of women representation in media. Far from being treated as window dressing, the movie explains how Carol Danvers is the reason behind the realization of the Avenger initiative, so, essentially, she is possibly one of the most important characters of the MCU. Carol's storyline is not in any way, shape or form dictated by gender roles. She is a woman, but she acts how she wants, dresses comfortably and the male characters she interacts with are either respectful to her or categorized as villains or antagonists. The struggles she faces as a woman who wants to be a pilot in the 80's in the United States are a relevant part of the plot, but the way her efforts are portrayed clearly sees her succeeding against men who are too proud to accept her valor and they are weak because of it. The lack of respect for her makes these men undesirable and uninteresting to both her and the movie's audience, while the ones who appreciate her abilities and recognize her strength are likeable and amusing. Overall Carol is strong, brave and endearingly funny and she is a solid and interesting protagonist in every single scene, with a storyline that always makes her stand out without being overdone.

*Captain Marvel* set a sensible change when it comes to Occupation of female characters and I therefore opted for a 5 out of 5 perfect score once again. Surely the stereotype of women in comic books

being just the girlfriends, aunts or mothers has been decently surpassed for quite some time, but the shift to a truly equal situation feels more tangible in *Captain Marvel*. Carol is a soldier, her Kree Starforce team is made of five people, two of which are women and her occupation is no strange thing. She did not need to “prove herself” to be accepted into her field of work because it is simply normal for a Kree woman to have this kind of job. The situation is a bit different when Carol’s backstory as human is told. When she was trying to become a pilot on Earth she did have to prove herself and was mocked for trying to get a job so stereotypically attributed to men. However, the scenes in which she struggles to obtain the recognition she deserves are part of a flashback. The movie conveys a feeling of disconnect from that period, as if it were something that was not only in the past, but outdated and undesirable. It appears as a conscious effort by the creators to show a preferable future in which gender equality is a reality. Carol was in fact capable of reaching her goals and so was Maria Rambeau who was living the same struggles, together with being a black woman and a single mother as well. They both succeeded. The other women in the movie are in the same situations. Dr. Lawson was a brilliant and respected scientist who died as a hero for what she believed in, Minn-Erva is a brave soldier who fights for what she thinks is right for her people. All the women in the movie have important jobs they very much enjoy having. Additionally, Maria Rambeau has a child, but she is a complex character and motherhood does not define her, it strengthens her. She is just as good as a mother as she was as a pilot and when duty calls she makes sure her daughter Monica is safe and then she helps Carol with her mission. Overall, female Occupation is a non-issue in the movie. Women have rewarding jobs for which they get credit. Moreover, Carol does not really have a secret identity in the movie. She first introduces herself as Vers when she does not remember her true identity and then subsequently states that her name is Carol. She is proud of who she is and she does not hide it in any way. This automatically means that there is no distinction between Carol Danvers and Captain Marvel and her life is not divided between being a superhero and being a “normal” person, eliminating what was the Invisible Woman’s problem: extremely powerful when wearing her super-suit, but relegated to the role of wife, sister and mother when she was just Susan Storm.

Gender Roles is one of the categories in which the movie was most successful. I have hinted about how men and women are portrayed as equal throughout most of the story, like when Carol and Fury wash the dishes together after having dinner at Maria’s house, but there is one single scene that in a matter of seconds manages to overthrow decades of sexist tropes. After easily defeating a whole fleet of alien bombers as if she had just gotten brunch with a friend, Carol comes back to the ground to deal with Yon-Rogg. He paternalistically tells her that he is proud of what she has become and then goes on to screaming about how she needs to prove to him that she is capable of beating him without her powers if she really wants to give a demonstration of her strength. Carol calmly watches him throw his fit and then promptly strikes him with one of her photon blasts, overtaking him in a heartbeat. She then walks over to him, stares him down and peacefully states: “I have nothing to prove to you.”. With one single line this movie is able to disintegrate a number of sexist stereotypes that have been part of media for decades. Carol’s storyline is about her battle

against all the people who have tried to break her spirit and how each time she defied them. “As she regains her lost humanity and uncovers the truth about the War, the truth strengthens her, it doesn’t diminish her.”<sup>93</sup> In the scene with Yon-Rogg she finally faces someone who has gas-lighted her for as long as she can remember, someone who has spent a lot of time trying to make her doubt herself and her loyalty. Her calmness is the loudest demonstration of her personal growth. Her whole life has been marked by men who thought she was not enough and she did not care one moment. Her story arc is perfectly devoid of self-doubt. Thus, when the man she thought to be her mentor tries once again to push her down, she refuses to play his game. She looks him dead in the eye, perfectly aware of how much stronger than him she is and of how much this fact scares him, and she gets rid of him without breaking a sweat while he makes a fool of himself by being overly emotional. The roles are completely inverted. How could I ever assign a score lower than a 5 out of 5?

As I have mentioned in the section about Average Poster Art, Sexualization is a non-issue in *Captain Marvel*, which makes it probably one of the easiest categories to score: 5 out of 5. Carol wears either her suit or casual clothing which gives her an adorably nostalgic 90’s grunge look. There is no scene in which a female character is dressed with revealing clothing. Members of the Starforce all wear the same uniform. Carol and Maria are dressed exactly like their male colleagues when training in the Airforce. Dr. Lawson, too is not only interpreted by an *actually* older woman instead of someone who could be Carol’s older sister, but she too is never sexualized. If *Wonder Woman* fell slightly short in this category, *Captain Marvel* did perfectly. Diana is the only woman on screen for the majority of the time and the contrast between her short skirt and all the men’s tactical gear is stark. Conversely, the *Captain Marvel* cast is way more diverse throughout the whole movie to begin with and all the female characters are far from being sexualized. Sex is not used in any way in the plot, and yet the movie surpassed the billion dollars in earnings, totalizing \$1.128 billion dollars<sup>94</sup> at the box office, providing proof that when a movie is targeted to women the success it obtains is outstanding.

Regarding the seventh and last category, Violence Against Women, *Captain Marvel* follows *Wonder Woman*’s steps once again. Since the movie is set in a war (although an inter-galactic one) just like *Wonder Woman*, a certain level of violence is essential. It is an action movie about superheroes, after all. However, what makes these two movies stand out is that the violence is never gendered. Moreover when the amount of women forming the main cast is large enough that anything that happens to female characters cannot be seen as gendered. If the only woman in a movie cast is brutalized as it so often happens, it can be easily attributed to misogyny, but when half the cast is female (heroes and villains alike) and a woman is involved in a fight scene, it is not gendered anymore, it is simply about characters of an action movie being portrayed while in action. Carol is undeniably a victim of micro-aggressions during her years in the U.S. Airforce and of abusive behavior from her mentor. These are, however, just part of a woman’s everyday life. What makes

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<sup>93</sup> Yarde, Alex, *I Have Nothing To Prove to You- Captain Marvel Review*, March 12, 2019, available at [goodmenproject.com](http://goodmenproject.com)

<sup>94</sup> *Captain Marvel* (2019), source *Box Office Mojo*, [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com), July 14, 2019.

*Captain Marvel* such a good movie is how relatable it is without being crude. It is how any woman in the audience can watch Carol's story unravel and find things in common with her own life experiences because virtually every single woman has experienced something similar to what Carol lives through in the movie. The form of violence that Carol endures are so subtle and so realistic that they make the story relatable without being excessively brutal just for the sake of violence itself, which is exactly what makes all the difference.

To sum up, *Captain Marvel* is, as of today, the only superhero movie with a female protagonist that could obtain an overall perfect score when using Katherine J. Murphy's set of seven categories. If *Wonder Woman* had some characteristics that would need some improvement, the *Captain Marvel* creators were able to create a superhero movie that women can really relate to. There is no useless romance, no pointless talking about beauty when it has nothing to do with the plot, just a woman battling her own demons and flawlessly succeeding.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to analyze how the level of representation of women in media has improved through the decades, based on the evolution of female superheroes, in comic books at first and then on the big screen. There surely is a strong connection between the media and how our society acts. They influence each other constantly, especially when they become strongly embedded in popular culture, like comics and movies do. Specifically, comic books have come a long way since the birth of Golden Age Superman in 1938. Initially aimed at children of all genders, comic books did not concern themselves with politics and were totally uncontroversial. Conversely, movies like *Captain Marvel* or *Wonder Woman* are now able to raise so much criticism and be a source of political debate. The fact that apparently harmless movies like these can be such a contentious topic proves not only that the film industry is more and more interested with politics, but that they are also able to move the topic of gender politics forward, reaching an audience of unprecedented size and introducing so many different people to the subject. The amount of social change that this kind of movies can bring about has never been so significant, regardless of how much they get criticized. In fact, being so harshly attacked for promoting gender equality is probably a sign that these kind of media are doing exactly what they are supposed to do: reshape public perception of reality. Political discourse, especially when it involves social matters, has a very distinctive feature, which is that the largest the pool of people who talk about it is, the fastest real change can be achieved. In less than five years, the two major distributors of superhero-related content, Marvel and DC Comics, released the first and currently sole two movies with female superheroes as protagonists. Both *Wonder Woman* and *Captain*

*Marvel* were extremely successful. No matter the amount of hate that these two productions received from anti-feminist propaganda, they were still among the top grossing movies of their corresponding release year. As a matter of fact, *Wonder Woman* ranked 10<sup>th</sup><sup>95</sup> in the 2017 worldwide grosses, earning \$821.8 million<sup>96</sup> and *Captain Marvel* reached the 4<sup>th</sup><sup>97</sup> position in 2019 with a considerable revenue of \$1.128 billion<sup>98</sup>. This is not simply the product of prosper marketing campaigns from companies, but the consequence of a society that has never been so preoccupied with social justice, finding itself in the middle of the Fourth Wave of Feminism and digital revolution. In fact, as much as we would all love for companies to produce this kind of content simply because of the goodness of their director's hearts, they still work with business in their minds. This, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. Companies like DC and Marvel, as powerful and influential as they are, have an audience to cater these kind of contents to, which is a sign of how the social climate in which we live allows them to have a market. Not even ten years ago, the success these movies obtained would had been unthinkable. Therefore, if stories written by women, about women and for women are having this amount of success it is pretty clear that our world is truly changing. *Wonder Woman* was proclaimed a feminist icon in 1972 and she is still inspiring girls and women almost fifty years later. *Captain Marvel* is the expression of the newest Feminist Wave with her short hair, practical jumpsuit and leadership abilities. Together they are the expression of female superheroes being a new, more equal, more modern, feminist source of representation of women in media.

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<sup>95</sup> Annual Movie Chart – 2017, source *The Numbers*, available at [www.the-numbers.com](http://www.the-numbers.com).

<sup>96</sup> *Wonder Woman* (2017), source *Box Office Mojo*, [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com), July 25, 2017.

<sup>97</sup> Top 2019 Movies at the Worldwide Box Office, source *The Numbers*, available at [www.the-numbers.com](http://www.the-numbers.com).

<sup>98</sup> *Captain Marvel* (2019), source *Box Office Mojo*, [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com), July 14, 2019.

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## Riassunto

La Golden Age della storia dei fumetti nasce tradizionalmente con Superman nel 1938 e termina nel 1956, coincidendo con il periodo tardo della Prima Ondata Femminista. Rappresenta il primo periodo in cui i fumetti moderni raccontano dei supereroi come li conosciamo oggi, ma la storia dei personaggi femminili è ben più tortuosa di quella di personaggi maschili di successo come Superman. Negli anni quaranta del novecento il ruolo delle donne nella società americana cambiò profondamente, a seguito della seconda guerra mondiale. Un grande numero di donne iniziò a lavorare nelle fabbriche, dal momento che la maggior parte della forza lavoro, composta da uomini, si trovava al fronte, portando il Paese ad allentare molto la presa sulle leggi che impedivano alle donne sposate di lavorare senza il consenso del marito. Purtroppo, però, quando i soldati tornarono in patria fu data loro la precedenza sul posto di lavoro, obbligando tutte le donne a tornare ad essere relegate nelle loro case e privandole della poca libertà che avevano guadagnato, nonostante l'enorme contributo da parte delle lavoratrici, senza le quali lo Stato americano si sarebbe trovato in difficoltà. È proprio negli anni della guerra che nasce la prima supereroina: Wonder Woman compare per la prima volta nel 1941 sulle pagine di All Star Comics, incarnando tutti i valori del supereroe classico, pur essendo una donna. Il suo creatore, William Moulton Marston, era un femminista convinto e basò il personaggio di Wonder Woman sulle sue due compagne, la moglie Elizabeth Holloway e la loro partner Olive Byrne. Marston era convinto che Wonder Woman fosse il perfetto prototipo di leader perché il suo potere era basato sulla fiducia e il rispetto reciproco tra lei e coloro che lei guidava. In molte delle sue

avventure Wonder Woman, nota anche come Diana di Themisclira, finisce per essere intrappolata o incatenata, ma riesce sempre a liberarsi, in una ricorrente affermazione di emancipazione femminile.

Il dopoguerra negli Stati Uniti fu un periodo molto particolare a livello sociale. I fumetti erano originariamente per bambini, che li leggevano senza particolari distinzioni di genere, ma gli anni cinquanta videro un forte ritorno verso valori conservatori che portarono a un aumento di segregazione di genere. I media ovviamente riflettevano questa situazione, ritraendo le donne quasi esclusivamente nel lavoro di cura, come madri, mogli, fidanzate e compagne. Nonostante avessero sostenuto l'economia del Paese negli anni della guerra e l'economia in ascesa, le donne americane erano riconosciute solo in quanto mogli e madri. Le cose iniziarono a cambiare dopo che *Il Secondo Sesso* di Simone de Beauvoir venne tradotto in inglese e pubblicato negli Stati Uniti nel 1953. Formalmente riconosciuta come ciò che dette inizio alla Seconda Ondata di Femminismo, la pubblicazione del libro coincise con l'istituzione del Comics Code Authority che è rimasto il principale organo di censura dei fumetti statunitensi fino al suo completo superamento nel 2011. Il Codice prevedeva una serie di regole per quanto riguarda la rappresentazione di donne per evitare un'eccessiva violenza, ma il risultato fu che per decenni le donne furono relegate al ruolo di "donzelle in pericolo", di fidanzate da salvare e poco più.

DC Comics decise di investire nuovamente nei supereroi, dopo un periodo di crisi del genere, pubblicando una nuova versione di The Flash nel 1956. Questo evento segna l'inizio della Silver Age dei fumetti. Contemporaneamente al nuovo Flash, si impose sul mercato una neonata Marvel Comics. Se DC rimaneva ancora legata ai suoi personaggi storici, rappresentati come prototipo di supereroi invincibili, Marvel seppe sfruttare nuovi tipi di personaggi e temi. Anche a causa del clima di insicurezza e disillusione tipico dei primi periodi della Guerra Fredda, i fumetti Marvel erano indirizzati agli adolescenti e ai giovani adulti e trattavano temi più complessi, meno divisi tra concetti assoluti di Bene e Male, con personaggi più "umani" e con problemi più vicini a quelli del pubblico che li leggeva. DC invece trovò un'altra formula fortunata, quella della squadra di supereroi. Nel 1960 pubblicò Justice League per la prima volta e il successo fu immediato. Marvel sfruttò il successo del concorrente per proporre a sua volta un team e fu così che nacquero I Fantastici Quattro. Questi, con La Cosa, introdussero un'ulteriore caratteristica che sarebbe poi diventata un punto di forza di Marvel Comics: anche i mostri possono essere supereroi. Sfruttando il periodo di forte instabilità sociale e politica che gli anni della Guerra Fredda avevano portato, Marvel rivoluzionò il campo dei fumetti con i suoi personaggi e fu proprio allora che molti nuovi personaggi femminili furono introdotti per la prima volta, pur rimanendo spesso personaggi secondari e in larga parte relegati ad essere le controparti femminili di uomini già conosciuti nel mondo dei supereroi, come ad esempio She-Hulk o Supergirl.

Gli anni sessanta e settanta furono quelli durante i quali la Seconda Ondata Femminista attraversò il suo picco negli Stati Uniti ed è proprio nel 1970 che viene normalmente collocata la data di inizio della Bronze Age dei fumetti. Il numero di personaggi femminili nei fumetti aumentò notevolmente. Poi, nel 1977, Marvel pubblicò Ms. Marvel aka Carol Danvers che, di recente, veste i panni di Captain Marvel in una

serie a lei dedicata. Ms. Marvel è poi diventata l'eroina di punta della compagnia e icona femminista, anche se originariamente era stata creata come semplice controparte femminile di Captain Marvel, che nella sua prima versione era un uomo, Ms. Marvel divenne presto molto apprezzata e il suo personaggio si è poi evoluto negli anni, assumendo diverse identità, inclusa quella più recente di Kamala Khan, una giovane Pakistana-Americana e prima supereroina musulmana della storia.

La Seconda Ondata Femminista fu un movimento di successo grazie al quale le donne americane ottennero molteplici e fondamentali vittorie, ma il percorso di reale e completa emancipazione femminile era tutt'altro che completo. Negli anni novanta si sviluppò quindi la Terza Ondata Femminista, basata principalmente sull'intersezionalità. La Seconda Ondata, infatti, era sicuramente stata un successo, ma principalmente per le donne bianche di classe media e non aveva tenuto conto di tutte le problematiche relative alle donne afroamericane e appartenenti ad altre minoranze. La Modern Age dei fumetti si sviluppò anch'essa in questo periodo, a metà degli anni '80. Questa era iniziò con molti cambiamenti in entrambe le principali case editrici, Marvel e DC, sia a livello manageriale, sia dal punto di vista di contenuti. DC rivoluzionò completamente il suo universo di supereroi mentre, caratteristica tipica della Modern Age, Marvel si concentrò sulla realizzazione di anti-eroi, ovvero personaggi dalla moralità ambigua che potessero permettere ai lettori di esplorare storie più complesse e potenzialmente anche più politicizzate. I personaggi femminili in questo periodo non mancavano, ma erano comunque spesso vittime di violenza, e di una forte sessualizzazione, tanto da portare alla realizzazione del sito web "Women in Refrigerators", chiamato così a causa dell'abitudine di uccidere i personaggi femminili in modi cruenti così da mandare avanti la storia del protagonista maschile che, una volta scoperto il corpo della fidanzata, si impegna per vendicarsi o agire in modi equivalenti.

Con il nuovo millennio e lo sviluppo della tecnologia la Terza Ondata si è trasformata, dopo il suo picco negli anni novanta, in una Quarta Ondata, che è quella che continua ancora oggi, così come la Modern Age dei fumetti, che è considerata ancora in corso. Con un interesse specifico per le disparità di genere, le molestie sessuali e diritti delle minoranze, la Quarta Ondata è visibile anche in come i media sono cambiati, supereroi compresi. Nel 2008 Marvel ha rilasciato *Iron Man*, il primo film della fortunatissima Saga dell'Infinito e nel 2013 è stata la volta di DC Comics con *Man of Steel*. Le compagnie hanno iniziato a produrre film sui supereroi che sono tornati con forza a occupare un posto nella cultura pop. Il progresso a livello di rappresentazione delle donne in questo tipo di media è innegabile. Anche solo dieci anni fa sarebbe stato impensabile vedere sul grande schermo film come *Wonder Woman* o *Captain Marvel*.

Dal punto di vista tecnico ci sono svariati strumenti che permettono di misurare il livello di qualità di rappresentazione delle donne nei media: il più conosciuto è il Bechdel Test, tristemente noto perché solo circa la metà dei film cult della storia lo superano. Altri test utili sono quello dello *Smurfette Principle* e quello della Lampada Sexy. Nel 2014, Katherine J. Murphy ha condotto uno studio sul miglioramento della qualità di rappresentazione delle donne nei fumetti Marvel a partire dalla Silver Age fino ai giorni nostri. In totale sono stati analizzati 788 fumetti divisi per decadi e giudicati con un punteggio da 0 a 5 in sette

categorie: disegni di copertina, Bechdel test, trama, occupazione, rapporti di forza, sessualizzazione femminile e violenza contro le donne. Dimostrando ciò che era stato previsto, lo studio ha rilevato un incremento nella qualità di rappresentazione delle donne nei media, con progressiva diminuzione della violenza gratuita e della sessualizzazione eccessiva, così come un aumento di fumetti che passano il Bechdel Test, personaggi femminili con lavori ben identificabili e soddisfacenti e un maggior equilibrio di potere tra uomini e donne.

Per analizzare i cambiamenti avvenuti nei fumetti DC, Tim Hanley ha ricostruito la percentuale di donne all'interno delle rubriche dedicate ai lettori, presenti nei fumetti a partire dagli anni sessanta e fino ai tardi anni novanta. Questa analisi ha permesso di provare con certezza che le donne hanno sempre letto fumetti sui supereroi, ma sono state ignorate per molto tempo da un mercato che non le considerava mai come possibili acquirenti. Questo atteggiamento da parte delle case editrici è però cambiato nel corso degli anni. Oggi infatti DC Comics sta attraversando un periodo estremamente florido per quanto riguarda i fumetti e questa situazione è strettamente collegata al fatto che circa un quarto di titoli pubblicati dalla compagnia presenta personaggi femminili come protagoniste, che contribuisce ad allargare notevolmente il bacino di utenza.

È indubbio che ci sia ancora moltissima strada da fare. Nonostante le donne compongano quasi la metà del totale di lettori di fumetti, questi ultimi si presentano ancora come costretti da molti stereotipi di genere. Tuttavia, gli ultimi anni hanno introdotto notevoli miglioramenti. Nel 2017 è stato rilasciato il film *Wonder Woman* e, due anni dopo, *Captain Marvel*. Questi sono i primi due film che abbiano delle supereroine come protagoniste. Il cambiamento a livello sociale è palpabile: entrambe le produzioni hanno ottenuto un enorme successo, dimostrando ancora una volta che quando i media tengono in considerazione gli interessi delle donne queste, e non solo, se ne interessano. La concezione che i supereroi siano “cose da maschi” non è altro che una falsità, che oltretutto non ha nulla a che vedere con le origini di questo genere di fumetti.

Sebbene presenti alcune criticità, come ad esempio un superamento del Bechdel Test che non lascia pienamente soddisfatti, *Wonder Woman* ha dato il via ad una nuova era di film di supereroi che abbiano le donne come protagoniste. Essere il primo film con tali caratteristiche implica avere delle grandi responsabilità e i creatori di questo film sono comunque riusciti a rappresentare con successo un personaggio che è stato una delle più importanti e riconosciute icone femministe per oltre cinquant'anni. Diversamente da *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel* è l'unico personaggio femminile in un film di supereroi che potrebbe ottenere un punteggio massimo seguendo il criterio di valutazione utilizzato da Katherine J. Murphy nel suo studio del 2014. I creatori di questa pellicola sono stati capaci di realizzare un film in cui le donne possono realmente vedersi rappresentate. Non esiste una trama romantica e la protagonista non è mai sessualizzata. *Captain Marvel* aka Carol Danvers è una donna che combatte per superare le difficoltà che incontra nel suo viaggio di crescita personale e ci riesce perfettamente, senza bisogno di essere salvata da nessuno.

Questo tipo di film è in grado di portare a un livello di cambiamento sociale che non è mai stato così significativo. Indipendentemente dalle critiche che produzioni del genere possono suscitare in quanto promotori dell'uguaglianza di genere. In effetti, il fatto che un film come *Captain Marvel* venga giudicato così pesantemente è la dimostrazione che i media stiano eseguendo il loro compito: modificare la percezione che la società ha di determinati standard, così che passare a nuovi modelli sia una transizione più semplice da affrontare. Più persone sono coinvolte nel dibattito di un certo argomento, più sarà semplice alimentare un vero cambiamento, come nel caso specifico del femminismo e la rappresentazione delle donne nei media. I supereroi non sono più soltanto un prodotto per bambini come negli anni trenta. Le produzioni Marvel e DC hanno una capacità di risonanza a livello sociale che prima dell'era digitale non sarebbe mai stata possibile. Di conseguenza, anche film come *Wonder Woman* e *Captain Marvel*, che vengono visti da milioni di persone, possono davvero aiutare a cambiare la nostra società, tanto da essere fonte di dibattiti politici. La realtà è che film come questi, che dovrebbero essere "innocui", riescono ad attirarsi le ire della propaganda anti-femminista, ma nonostante questo sono entrambi riusciti ad ottenere tra i maggiori incassi nei loro rispettivi anni di uscita. Eppure, meno di dieci anni fa un successo simile non sarebbe mai stato raggiunto. Di conseguenza è evidente come il nostro mondo stia cambiando, seppur lentamente, quando si parla di uguaglianza di genere. *Wonder Woman* e *Captain Marvel* sono i primi volti di un nuovo modo di rappresentare le donne nei media in modo più equo, più moderno e femminista.