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WRTG 3020-035

10 May 2017

Women in Comic Books and Women in The Comic Book Fandom

Heroines and villainesses in comic books have always been treated as a lesser to their male counterparts. The job of a woman in comic books is to develop the male character, and to further their struggles as an interesting hero. When female superheroes and villains were first introduced to comic books, it can be regarded as a major step for the comic book community. However, the treatment of women in this community has not changed the way the creators originally hoped. While many women in comic books are becoming independent and distanced from their male counterparts, the women are still objectified and treated as lesser by the men in the comic book world and the comic book community. Through my short manga, I explore the treatment of women in the comic book world and the community. It is centered around a woman who is attending Comic Con and how she is treated as a woman who is cosplaying, and who is showing her membership to the comic book community.

Looking at the comic book community, it seems like it is male dominated, however, women make up half of the fanbase; and yet the women are treated poorly. In Brett Shenker's article, he goes over market research and finds that about half the fans of comic books are females. Using Facebook as a tool to track the number of fans, women make up 46.67% of the comic book community (Schenker). Another individual looked at the attendees of the 2015 San Diego Comic Con, and discovered that 49% were male, 49% female, and 2% were non-binary (Cavna). However, even with half of the comic book community being female, women are still

treated poorly by their male counterparts. In Stephanie Orme's paper, "Femininity and Fandom: The Dual-Stigmatisation of Female Comic Book Fans," she gives a possible reason why male comic book fans belittle their female counterparts. Orme interviewed fifteen women who are fans of comic books. While they do not feel shame for reading comic books, they did feel a double stigma from their male counterparts and everyone else who does not qualify as part of the comic book community. Because of this double stigma, this might be the reason women will keep to themselves about liking comic books. Since women who enjoy comic books are not as forthcoming with it, this might be why pop-culture continues the rare female fan (6-11). Because the idea of the *rare female fan* is common in society, this might be why the male fans belittle the female fans.

In my short manga, the main character Cereza, is a proud member of the comic book community, and openly displays it to the world. She is one of many comic book fans going to Comic Con and has prepared herself to show herself as part of the comic book community. On Friday, a male member of the community stigmatizes her. The man belittles Cereza by insulting who she is cosplaying as and questioning if she is really a fan of the comic book. While she does not feel the double stigma that Austin described, she still feels a stigma from her male counterparts. Sometimes, being denounced by members of a community a person is in, is more painful than being stigmatized by people outside that community. While it is not shown on Friday, Cereza still feels the pain of being belittled and told that her opinions are not valid by members of her community. This treatment, and how she is treated on Saturday, have a big impact on her and her standing as a member of the comic book community.

The way women are represented in comic books carries over to the way male fans treat female fans. In Shannon Austin's paper, "Batman's Female Foes: The Gender War in Gotham

City,” she talks about how women with power in the Batman universe are a threat to the male characters. Not only are the villainesses in the Batman universe seen as a threat, they are turned into dangerous monsters who must use their sexuality to fight the men. Women are traditionally stereotyped as passive, and are not a treat. However, villainesses like Catwoman and Poison Ivy, fight for their power in a male dominated society, they do not fit the stereotype of *passive women*. The men must then fight against them and try to dominate them and put them back *in their place* (2-3). While Austin focuses on the Batman universe, this can also apply to the way women are treated in comic books in general. Even powerful female superheroes must live in accordance to the men. One of the most powerful women in comic books is Wonder Woman, an Amazon princess, who must conform to live amongst men. While Amazonian training is centered round fighting against men, Wonder Woman must put aside her hatred for men to help them. With this portrait of passive women who must be put in their place, fans are conditioned to believe this is the truth, especially more impressionable fans. When someone is cosplaying, they are attempting to make the fictional character real. When some fans come across a cosplayer, they cannot distinguish the cosplayer from the character. This will lead to that fan treating the cosplayer like the character and not a person. This can be prevalent with male fans and female cosplayers, as the male fans treat the female cosplayers poorly. Since women in comic books are portrayed as submissive and below men, male fans will often belittle women, and treat them as lesser.

In my manga, Cereza claims her power in the form of showing that she is a fan of the comic books with cosplay. On Friday, when the man belittles her, he is trying to put her down as he perceives her being there, especially in cosplay, as a threat. He is trying to dominate her as an opponent rather than just accepting her as part of *his* community. On Saturday, Cereza cosplays

again, and a man harasses her. When she tries to stand up for herself, the man fights back, in the form of words. He is trying to assert that he has more authority than her and trying to put her back in *her place* as passive women in society. These men treat Cereza poorly, and expect her to just submit to what they are saying or doing.

No matter how powerful or likable a woman is in comic books, they are objectified and turn into sexual objects. Austin said, in her paper, that women are objectified and often must sexualize their bodies to fight men (2). In another article entitled, “Female Superhero Representation in Comics,” the author talks about women outfigts and the way women are often drawn. Female characters often have skin tight outfits that do not cover much; in society, if any female shows too much skin, the outfit is deemed overly sexual (VelvetRose). While female characters are drawn with revealing outfits, they are often drawn in contorted positions to show off their curvier parts, further objectifying them. When it comes to conventions, it is a similar case. There are many convention attendees have respect for others, and ask permission for photographs, and do not (blatantly) turn women into sex objects. However, when the few attendees that objectify women come out, they stick out and give a bad reputation to all other convention goers. Like I said above, fans are conditioned to seeing these portrayals of women. When an attendee at a convention may see a cosplayer as a real-life form of a comic book character, they do not see them as an actual person. These attendees see the person as a character that they have been trained to see as oversexualized, because of their poses and clothes they wear that VelvetRose talked about.

Comic book characters are often sexualized by the fanbase, however some of the fans cannot disconnect the character on paper from a person expressing their love for the character in the form of cosplay. While not every fan does this, when it does happen, it is very

impressionable and gives others a bad reputation. In my short manga, Cereza is objectified by a man on Saturday who cannot disconnect the character from the person. He sees Cereza as Wonder Woman, and he expects her to be passive and accepting to his actions when he grabs her. When Cereza is cosplaying, he turns her into a sex object and does not care about how she feels. When Cereza confronts him on this, he fights back to *put her back into her place*. The man says he was acting in character for his cosplay, however when it comes to Cereza defending herself, he casts aside her feelings. There is a double standard, where he can express himself as the character, and himself, yet Cereza cannot express herself and needs to be an object for the man.

On the final day of the convention, Cereza decides to not cosplay and give up on being part of the comic book community. I mentioned earlier that Cereza claimed power in the form of cosplaying. When she decides not to dress in cosplay, she is giving up her power, and in essence submitting to the men who belittled her. It is a dramatic move for Cereza to stop cosplaying, and to stop liking comic books in general, based on her first experience at a convention. However, it is meant to show the pain she felt by not being accepted, and objectified by her peers. It is discouraging and infuriating to have your knowledge, about something you love, questioned, and put down. While some cosplayers hold their tongue when confronted with a person who is harassing them, it can seem like it does not phase them and they do not care. However, Cereza is meant to show the silenced pain and frustration that is not normally shown by a cosplayer.

Women in the comic book community are becoming more known, and are now almost half of the fanbase. However, this is not just because females are becoming more pronounced in the comic books. In fact, most of the American comic books have male characters as the leading protagonist and antagonist. According to Facciani et al in “A Content-Analysis of Race, Gender,

and Class in American Comic Books,” and their study of popular American comic books, the protagonists were mainly men. However, it is not just protagonists that are men, the villains were more often men than women. From their samples, 85% of the characters were men, and were more likely to be protagonists than any other gender. Women becoming prominent might be the result of social media, especially when angered fans want their voice heard. Introducing a new, strong female character is not an easy thing to do in comic books. When Jane Foster took up the mantle as Thor, it was unhappy fans that took to the internet to express their distaste, this explosion on social media led to an increase of searches for this, and was an excellent time for internet news sources to get people to read their articles.

With the increasing numbers of females being public about being part of the comic book fanbase, some males take this as a threat. This may be because in pop culture, there is still the depiction of the rare female fan. However, another possible reason is because comic books conditioned their audience this way. The audience is used to seeing any woman with power, in any way, as a threat that needs to be dealt with. The way that women have been treated makes it seem like they are an unwanted and unnecessary part of the community.

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