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Wonder Woman for White Women

Jill Lepore, author and Harvard historian, wrote a detailed account of the widely unknown history surrounding the creation and publication of the first *Wonder Woman* comics during the 1940s in her 2015 book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. The book details the life of one William Moulton Marston and the women around him, including Elizabeth Sadie Holloway, Olive Byrne, Marjorie Huntley, and Margaret Sanger, who created the stories for *Wonder Woman*. There is no doubt that Wonder Woman the heroine, at least the Marston-Holloway-Byrne-Sanger-Huntley version, was, and is, a feminist icon. She was established to help balance out the demographics of superhero comics at the time, which comprised of mostly male superheroes. She proved to young girls and women around the United States that they could be strong, educated, and smart at the time. She was a hero created by women for women. However, like all histories, *Wonder Woman's* is complicated. The heroine is white and a product of the racist first wave feminist movement and alienates people of color in her comics. In this essay, I will examine how the superhero, Wonder Women, does not represent all women because she has racist roots and contains stereotypical depictions of people of color and Jewish people in her comic book.

Perhaps what made her most feminist was her kryptonite-like weakness. If Wonder Woman is tied up in chains, then she loses her power and becomes vulnerable (Lepore 220).

Marston turned this into an allegory for women's oppression. However, this is also tied back to racist implications from the first wave feminist movement. Suffragist advertisement and rhetoric often contained images of women in chains. The chains often times were attached to heavy metal balls, and women in these political advertisements often appeared to be members of a chain gang (57). Those chains were made to represent the gravity of the oppression of the patriarchy that women were a part of at the time. The inability to vote or for it to be illegal for a married woman to work outside of the home and in the public sphere was comparable to being perpetually tied up. The patriarchy was a ball and chain. However, this image was pulled directly from the abolition movement. These women were comparing their right to vote, or lack thereof, to being a slave—to being property rather than actual humans who have some social standing. The majority of these women in the first wave were white, middle-class women who had much more privilege over their poor white and women of color counterparts. First wave feminism only fought for the right for these privileged women to vote. Many first wave feminists such as Margaret Sanger, Olive Byrne's aunt and co-founder of Planned Parenthood, subscribed to the idea of eugenics; women of color and poor white women should be weeded out by sterilization and use of birth control (99). There was no doubt that this movement was entrenched in racism and classism. However, it is important to note that *Wonder Woman* is a product of the first wave movement and the women who participated in it.

Jill Lepore points out the connection to Wonder Woman's weakness and the rhetoric used during the first wave to gain the suffrage vote. She Juxtaposes two images: one of a first wave drawing used to promote feminism, and the other an image of Wonder Woman bound in chains (85). The ropes that the suffragist was tied up in read "politics is no place for women: and her

headpiece claims she is the spirit of many voters who are women (85). The chains Wonder Woman is bound in, and is breaking free from, contains words and phrases such as "male superiority" and "prejudice" (85). The chains that strip Wonder Woman of her powers represents the same chains that oppressed women in first wave rhetoric. Her chains are the patriarchal forces that keep women in target positions and give men of similar social status agency. However, indirectly, this also compares her lack of superpowers to being a slave; she is nothing more than a piece of property. This trivializes and undermines the many African lives who were stolen from their homeland to be beaten and treated like dirt. It is offensive to the race of people who had centuries of torment forced upon them so their owners could have free labor. This makes it hard for wonder women to represent all women, knowing her superpower weakness is compared to centuries of anti-black racism.

Perhaps what hindered Wonder Woman's ability to represent many women of color was the blatant racism in *Wonder Women*. This theme was not exclusive to *Wonder Woman* comics, though. Many other titles including *Superman* and *Batman* relied on stereotypical tropes that even *Wonder Woman* used for its plots. According to Lepore, Dr. Frederick Wertham, a child psychiatrist, was a big opponent of comic books. He believed that they were corrupting the minds of children all over the country (265-271). Most of his claims and supporting evidence for those claims were quite outlandish. He frequently relied on heterosexism and sexism to get his points across, saying that *Batman* was going to turn young boys gay and that Sapphic undertones in *Wonder Woman* were going to turn many young women into lesbians. While most of his claims about comic books and how they influence young readers were nonsensical, far-reaching, and offensive, he made a valid point on the racism that was so pervasive in the genre (265-271).

In one of his studies, he cites a young black girl who reads many comics a day. She implies that she feels people of her race were not represented properly in these comics because the depictions of people of color are garish and feature stereotypical imagery (268). Wertham also pointed that the heroes in comics such as Wonder Woman in *Wonder Woman* are always white; that they are supposed to represent the all-American. On the other hand, he says that many of the characters of color are Jewish, people of color, and people from outside the United States (267). Going off of Dr. Wertham's claims, it would be fair to say that Euro-American girls and women are more likely to see themselves represented in a positive manner than girls and women of color. Also, according to Abby Ferber, the author of "What White Supremacists Taught a Jewish Scholar About Identity" in *Race, Class, & Gender: An Anthology*, white supremacists view Jewish people as another race (96). It is common for Jewish people to be viewed as a threat to racial purity, and thus a target group in a society where Christian hegemony is pervasive (96). Due to the anti-Semitism in the comics, it could be suggested that some Jewish women might not see themselves represented in the original *Wonder Woman* as well—that they might feel alienated in the same way that women color might.

It is clear that due to *Wonder Woman's* complicated history, it did not represent women of color and Jewish women like she did white women. Wonder Woman was closely tied to the racist rhetorical moves that were popular during the first wave and the racist portrayals of Jewish people and people of color in the comics. However, since blatantly racist and anti-Semitic depictions of people in popular culture have become less socially acceptable, more modern versions and adaptations of the heroine are closer to achieving the goal of representation of all

women. Regardless, Wonder Woman was a feminist figure that young girls and women could look up to at the time to show them that they are strong, that they can be a hero, too.

Works Cited

Lepore, Jill. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. Vintage Books, 2015.

Ferber, Abby. "What White Supremacists Taught a Jewish Scholar About Identity." *Race, Class, & Gender: An Anthology*, edited by Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, 8th ed., Cengage Learning, 2013.