Goddess in a cape: Feminine divine as comic book superhero

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Goddess in a cape: Feminine divine as comic book superhero

by

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Introduction: This Girl’s Journey in the World of Comic Books

My mother gave me her copy of Mythology by Edith Hamilton about three seconds after I watched Harry Hamilton in Clash of the Titans.¹ I believe she was tired of answering my endless questions. The stories of these ancient Gods and Goddesses were so foreign and exciting that I wanted to absorb everything I could. They explained so much about our world, explanations I found lacking in the stories I heard from my friends about Genesis and Jesus.² Most importantly, they provided me with tales of extraordinary women and reminded me a great deal of my hero, Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman, as played by Lynda Carter, arrived on the small screen the year I was born.³ I honestly remember very little of the actual show, other than a woman spinning a great deal. But I do remember the Wonder Woman doll I was so terribly fond of and the stories I created about her heroism while I sat on my driveway with the doll, pretending she was once again saving the world (and likely Steve Trevor). I wanted to be Wonder Woman (Fig. 1). What four year-old girl in 1979, didn’t?

¹ The major motion picture, Clash of the Titans, was released in 1981 as a film adaptation to the classic Greek myth of Perseus’s battle with Medusa and the Kraken to save the life of Princess Andromeda.

² As a child, I was raised to consider religion and religious beliefs matters of personal choice and was therefore never required to attend a church service. At an early age, I determined that I did not believe in the Christian religion as it was presented to me based on a number of its tenets and went about creating a very personal form of spirituality.

³ Wonder Woman, the television series that adapted the adventures of the character created in 1941 as a comic book superhero, ran from 1975 until 1979.
Of course, we had other choices. As I lay in a hospital bed in 1983, after just having my adenoids removed and tubes placed in my ears, I scanned every single inch of my new *New Teen Titan* comic book. This book told the story of a group of young adults with super-powers. There was Robin and Cyborg, but also Wonder Girl, Starfire, and Raven. These young women reminded me so much of the Greek Goddesses. In 1984, *Supergirl* arrived on the big screen and I ate it up, regardless of how poorly produced and written the movie may have been. I was desperate for a female hero like Superman and Batman, and Supergirl had to fill those shoes after the cancellation of Wonder Woman. My desperation for a female hero also meant that *New Teen Titans* issue #29 absorbed me until the pages fell apart. Yet, until my senior year of high school, it was the only comic book I read.

It was the only comic book I read because somewhere I got the idea that girls shouldn’t read comic books. I don’t recall anyone ever coming right out and telling me
such nonsense, but it was obvious to me that I should be reading *The Babysitter’s Club* instead of the *New Teen Titans*. Comic books and their heroes were for boys.⁴ I gave up on being a superhero in a world full of Goddesses and Gods, and took up more suitable imagining for a girl, like Barbie. With that, I adopted the prevailing view that comic books were not only made for boys, but that they were “low” culture and best left for the uneducated.⁵

Years later, at the age of 18, I picked up comic books again at the request of a boyfriend. Concerned that I may die of boredom as I recovered from mono my senior year of high school, he quickly arrived by my bedside with a stack of graphic novels. The irony of my repeated relationship between comic books and convalescence is not lost on me.

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⁴ This is a common misconception, one shared by Paul Levitz (Wilson, 12/8/2010), who stated, “I’m not sure that young women are as interested in reading about superheroes. The fundamental dynamic of the superhero story has historically been more appealing to boys than to girls.” Ms. Snarky (Ms. Snarky, 9/24/2011) also addressed this issue when she stated:

“For twenty years – roughly two thirds of my life – I have been a loyal fan of comics. But time and time again, I have been told that these comics, these things that I love, have spent more money on that I even want to think about, and devote part of my week to each and every week, are not really for me. Not completely anyway. Anytime I go into a new local comic book shop, I enter with trepidation, wondering how I’ll be received. Will someone ask me if I’m buying something for my boyfriend/brother/husband/son? Will someone look at me with disdain and then use his body to *block* me from the comic I want to read because hey, girls don’t belong in here? Will someone ask me if I’m only in there because I think an actor in a comic book movie is hot? Will someone turn to me and tell me with a snide look that they don’t sell “any girly manga” in there, so I should just leave? It could happen. All of these things *have* happened. To me.”

⁵ Low culture is often a derogatory term used for some forms of popular culture to differentiate such media as television, comic books, and escapist fiction, from high culture that consists of works of art held in high esteem by the society.
When I first began to read the books left with me, I was instantly blown away at how incredibly limited my view had been on what constituted decent “grown-up” reading material, which really was quite sad given the number of years I spent worshipping the Wakefield twins of Sweet Valley High.\textsuperscript{6} While I learned to view comic books as silly books for boys and grown men lacking social skills (a stereotyped view of comic book readers best portrayed in the television show \textit{The Big Bang Theory}), what I discovered in those issues of \textit{Watchmen}, and the constant stream of additional titles given to me in my recovery, were intelligent stories, the drama of good versus evil, and a subtle, yet powerful, display of modern mythology.

The very fact that the female population of superheroes exploded during this same time frame likely contributed to my growing interest in comic books. In the early 1990’s you could not walk into a comic book shop without seeing women gracing the covers of countless comic books. It was the decade of \textit{Bad Girl} comics,\textsuperscript{7} and women were everywhere. During this time, my love of comic books grew enough that I began to work at a comic book store in exchange for a discount on the comic books I purchased. This allowed me to explore titles like \textit{Gen}, \textit{Witchblade}, \textit{Vampirella}, \textit{Ghost}, \textit{Uncanny X-Men}, \textit{Excalibur}, and \textit{X-Factor}, all books with lead female heroes.

\textsuperscript{6} Sweet Valley High is a novel series created by Francine Pascal. The series began publication in 1983 and continued publication for nearly twenty years. The books featured the adventures of blond California high school twins, Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Bad Girl} comics contrasted with past decades of \textit{Good Girl} art and featured strong, independent women with an attitude. These women, including Vampirella, Elektra, Lady Death, and Lara Croft, were often portrayed in sexually provocative clothing blending the worlds of sex, vengeance, and violence.
In my excitement at finding a vast array of strong and independent women to fill the void left by Lynda Carter, I did not yet conceive that these comic books were never really intended for a female audience and that the women in the stories were never meant to be heroes for young girls. The more I noticed the lack of women in the comic book shop, other than those standing around waiting for their boyfriends to pay, the more I began to realize what an oddity I was in the comic book world. I was a unicorn, a mythological creature of whom stories were told but who was never actually seen (a concept also immortalized by The Big Bang Theory).8 Female comic books fans did not exist and therefore, comic books were not written with the intention of inspiring the female gender.

I looked at Vampirella, whose story fascinated me with its blending of vampire and Jewish mythology,9 and wondered why she existed. She was strong and independent. She knew her own mind and had a mission, but was she a hero for women and girls? Were any of the women gracing the covers and pages of comic books heroes for women, or were they simply eye candy for male readers? I only had to look at the wall of new arrivals (Figs 2 & 3) to answer those questions.

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8 CNN’s Geekout blog published an article on November 1, 2011 that looked at the common use, particularly on twitter, of the term unicorn to describe female fans of comic books. The Bing Bang Theory season 2/episode 20 (The Hofstadter Isotope) highlights the stereotypical reaction of a female entering a comic book store.

9 In the 1990’s, Vampirella’s origin story was revised by Harris comic books. In this version, Vampirella is the daughter of Lilith, the first wife of Adam in Jewish mythology. According to mythology, Lilith is banished from Eden and in an act of revenge, births demon races. In the Harris comic books, Lilith creates Vampirella, a good vampire, as an act of redemption.
Figure 2: Cover Image of Dawn No. 1 - Ascension. Published 6/1995 by Sirius Entertainment.  
http://www.comicvine.com/dawn-ascension/37-40159/
From Lady Death to Rawhide, we were sold the idea that women were indeed important characters in comics. It was as if the industry was waving around a book and saying, “Stop your complaining, women have their own titles now.” What they weren’t saying, but what was becoming increasingly clear to me, was that the women portrayed...
in those same books came into existence as objects of male heterosexual fantasy, and their primary role was male pleasure.

After more than five years as a comic book reader, I walked away. I could no longer look past the enormous breasts, sexual exploitation, and second billing of my beloved female heroes. I could not support an industry that objectified women and stuffed their mangled bodies into refrigerators.¹⁰ I was of the mindset of “if you don’t like it, don’t read it.” Yet, the appeal of a hero in a female super-powered body, saving the world and all of humanity, never went away. More importantly, I became a mother and the idea of “ignore it and it will go away” no longer worked.

My son’s exposure to comic books was guaranteed. Even if I had stopped reading, his father’s home had an entire room set aside to house a life-long comic book collection. My son’s toys and games all held a superhero theme, from Spider-Man and Friends to Justice League action figures. I accepted this and I even began to dip my toes back into the culture, if only to know what my son was being exposed to and what particular battles I had before me in raising a son who understood and fought against the sexual exploitation of women.

What I found, after a significant absence, was that everything was still status quo. Female superheroes were still arm candy, vehicles for dressing up a storyline rather than the storyline themselves. Female superheroes were still cookie-cutter Playboys centerfolds in physically impossible poses who managed to thrust both their

¹⁰ Women in refrigerators refers to a website created by Gail Simone that highlights the brutality experienced by female comic book characters.
breasts and butts into the foreground. I also found that I still loved the modern mythology that was so easily portrayed in those full-color pages. I discovered that I missed my heroes in tights, my modern Gods and Goddesses.

As a woman, I live within a culture where my worth is measured by my breast size (leaving me tremendously lacking) and what matters most is the clothing I choose to wear to a meeting rather than the works that I produce. As a student of religion and mythology, I must face the constant battle of religion versus science and the cultural perception that religion (at least those outside the Abrahamic traditions) is a product of primitive cultures that do not have the benefit of science. As a participant in the geek culture of comic books, I am highly conscious of the belief that comic book fans should just grow up and read real books with characters that don’t run around in capes and tights.

I am aware of the importance of the work to be examined because I am a female member of the comic book geek culture and the mother of a son also immersed in that culture. The debate regarding women in comic books, whether as characters or creators, is a long standing debate, existing nearly from the very beginning of the genre. Sadly, the debate has changed little in the last eighty years, and it can likely be argued that the status of women in the culture has only lessened in that timeframe.

11 For a humorous look at the impossible poses of female comic book characters see “Internet Attempts to Recreate Comic Book Character’s Ridiculous Sexy Pose.” (Hartman, 9/6/2011) Additionally, the term “brokeback” has been created to describe the poses of female characters that show off both their breasts and buttocks to the best degree. A Tumblr blog, http://thebrokebackpose.tumblr.com/, has been created to chronicle these poses.
It is my hope that this work can take the debate to a new level of discourse. Perhaps this work will allow the debate to go beyond the common “yeah, buts” and femi-nazi name calling and allow women to participate in superhero comic book culture as just another set of accepted and respected citizens. Perhaps it will also elevate the status of comic books and modern mythology for a larger audience and encourage non-comic book readers to examine the larger frame of popular culture with a more discerning eye.
Chapter 1: What is Mythology?

If we intend to discuss comic book superheroes as characters of modern mythology we must first understand what mythology is. Defining mythology is much like trying to nail down a definition of religion or love, you know it when you see it but could never really capture its essence in words. The challenge to defining mythology, as well as religion and love, often begins with your personal perspective and the experiences you bring to the table.

A common definition of myth is something that is not true, illustrated by popular magazine covers that advertise the “7 myths of dieting” or the “9 myths of aging.” As often, mythology is viewed as a collection of legends, including the stories of Zeus’ many affairs, Hera’s constant nagging, and Perseus beheading Medusa. For many, mythology is simply the tales of Ancient Greece, discovered in high school English class and never thought of again, or at least not until a major motion picture adapts the stories for the big screen.

Among scholars, the definition of mythology expands to include any number of perspectives. There are scholars who consider myths products of superstitious and primitive cultures. Max Muller, philosopher and author of the Sacred Books of the East, argued that mythology is a “disease of language,” a result of a confusion of words used by primitive persons to describe the overwhelming acts of nature around them. According to Muller, the Gods began as words used to convey abstract ideas but
transformed into imagined personalities, leading primitive persons to now take terms such as shining, which defined an aspect of the sun, and turn that word into a name of a particular God or Goddess.¹

Other scholars argue that mythology is a collection of sacred tales told by a particular group of individuals belonging to the same tribe or religion. Anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor supported the view that mythology was a means of explaining the world, for instance why it rained or why the sun rose each day.² Another anthropologist, James Frazer, presented myth as a result of the mysterious vegetative cycles to which primitive persons were subject, and saw fertility as the universal heart of mythology.³

For a number of scholars, myths are a means of communicating cultural attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of behavior. For instance, Emile Durkheim argued that myths were not explanations of natural occurrences, but instead represented the moral system, cosmology, and history of a culture. Myths reiterated the morality and believes of the society in order to strengthen the group as a whole.⁴

For these scholars, myth serves a function beyond entertainment and many scholars attempted to find universal myths across cultures. As Western scholars began studying other cultures, recurring themes, such as floods and divine heroes, led to the

¹ Dubuisson, 2006, 19-20
² Segal, 2004, 14
³ Dubuisson, 2006, 21
⁴ Dubuisson, 2006, 30-34
theory of universal myths. This search for universal meanings, characteristics, and beliefs was intended to create a unifying experience of all humans, yet it was often colored by the privileged perspective of white, Western, male scholars. This perspective often misjudged or misinterpreted myths and religious symbols due to the scholars’ personal experience and cultural attitudes. As a result, the universals that were defined by these scholars often eclipsed the particulars of a myth, stripping the myths of their cultural context and importance.

In *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, Wendy Doniger states that myth can be studied through a microscope or a telescope. Through a microscope, we see “the thousands of details that each culture, indeed each version, uses to bring the story to life – what the people in the story are eating and wearing, what language they are speaking, and all the rest.” Through the telescope end, we see the unifying themes. Doniger suggests looking through the telescope for the universal view, the naked eye for the cultural view, and the microscope for the individual insight. The problem lies in looking through only one view.

For instance, Joseph Campbell and Otto Rank subscribed to a universal hero myth that transcended all cultures. Rank focused on the universal characteristics of the hero in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, characteristics such as the oracular pronunciation of the soon-to-be-born hero’s role in his father’s death. Campbell, on the other hand, charted the journey of the hero’s life, from the call of the quest to the

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5 Doniger, 2011, 9
eventual return. Campbell’s hero myth reflected the American ideal individualism and he believed that myth was really about one’s inner most identity and self-actualization.⁶

For Campbell, myths held a mystical function that awakened an individual’s sense of awe. Myth also provided an image of the universe that was in harmony with the times, supported cultural norms, and guided the individual through life.⁷ Both Rank and Campbell insisted that these characteristics and steps of the hero myth were universal, regardless of gender or culture. However, a number of scholars have effectively shown the gendered and cultural bias of the hero in both their work.

Campbell is often criticized for interpreting myths to conform to his theories as well as the passive role of females in his male-dominated monomyth. A close critique of the hero’s quest illustrates androcentric thinking toward the field of mythology, highlighting the tendency to collapse the human and male experience into one cultural norm. This tendency leads to the assumption that masculine thought and language are adequate in describing the human experience and creates a system in which women are seen as other and object.⁸

This criticism has not stopped film makers and authors from using the formula to create epic stories such as Star Wars and The Matrix. We often find Campbell’s stages between the pages of comic books, from Spiderman’s initial refusal to use his powers for good to Superman’s death and resurrection. The formula has been replicated so

⁶ Ellwood, 1999, 129
⁷ Ellwood, 1999, 155
⁸ Gross, 1977, 9-11
often in the creation of our modern mythology that it is hard not to see it as “truth” regardless of the problems shown by scholars.

The theories of Frazer in *The Golden Bough* and Campbell in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* have been discredited or criticized time after time. Regardless of their academic validity, these theories spread into popular culture and spoke so eloquently to the cultural norms that they are still upheld as valid theories by the public. *Hero With a Thousand Faces* continues to be utilized by many modern storytellers as the framework for heroic stories.

Myths often contain stories of Gods, Goddess, and semi-divine beings. Religious historian, Mircea Eliade, focused on the sacred nature of mythology. Sacred, according to Eliade, existed in contrast with the profane. Sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world, and Eliade expressed the theory that religious individuals exist in sacred space, space with order and structure, as opposed to the chaotic and meaningless space of the profane. Because sacred space provides order and structure it also provides a location of orientation. According to Eliade, this location is the *axis mundi*, the center of the world. It is from this center that creation began and is continuously reborn, a manifestation of the Sacred time.⁹

Eliade stated that archaic individuals lived in a cyclical time, re-enacting the Sacred time and Sacred space. Through their myths and rituals, archaic persons were constantly renewing their connection to Sacred, constantly aware of the cycle of birth,

⁹ Eliade, 1959, 36
death, and rebirth. By existing in sacred time, such as the times of religious festivals or rituals, individuals made the primordial mythical past present, recovering and repeating Sacred time.

Modern man, in contrast, exists in a historical timeline where one event follows another down a straight path. Eliade argued that this deviation from the cyclical view of time resulted in a disconnection with Sacred and created our modern stresses and anxieties. It is the continuing myths, according to Eliade, that seek to bring us back to the time of origin.\footnote{Eliade discusses Sacred time in Chapter 2 of The Sacred and the Profane.} While myths of Western culture illustrate myths as a method of eternal return, critics point to Greek myths as examples that do not meet Eliade’s theories of myth.

A number of scholars of the past, scholars such as Tylor and Frazer, held to the idea of social evolution. This theory stated that cultures evolved over time from the primitive culture in which myths were created and existed to more civilized cultures, in which rationality and science explained the world. The theory of social evolution resulted in the idea that mythology was limited to primitive cultures and that Western culture had moved beyond the need for such narratives. An examination of our popular culture against the defining characteristics of mythology illustrates the continuation of mythic narrative into modern Western culture.

In 1957, Roland Barthes published a collection of essays under the title *Mythologies* that examined the tendency of modern culture to create new myths. The
first half of *Mythologies* is a collection of essays resulting from Barthes’ reflection of the existence of the mythical dimension in French daily life. These essays focus on such phenomenon as professional wrestling, detergents, and red wine. In the second half of *Mythologies*, Barthes states myth is a system of communication. According to Barthes, myths are not messages, but instead the way those messages are communicated. Myth is the form, not the object. Given Barthes’ definition of myth, all things can be mythologized. What he observes is that some items are expressed mythically for a certain amount of time, and may then pass out of mythic expression, only to be replaced by another item. According to Barthes, “myth is a type of speech chosen by history.”\(^\text{11}\) In *Mythologies*, we are reminded that myths are created for a reason and purpose, formed to perpetuate the ideas and values of those in power and disseminated through the media. These myths then become “naturalized,” accepted unquestionably as fact by a particular culture.

The source and control of our mythic narrative cannot be overlooked. Jennifer K. Stuller stated, in *Ink-stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*, myths “that reach a mass audience are generally made, manipulated, and marketed by those in positions of power and are representative of a small stereotypical or even imaginary population.”\(^\text{12}\)

What we know of the Greek mythic narrative was not written down by the average Greek citizen, but by highly educated scholars often paid to enhance the legacy and

\(^\text{11}\) Barthes, 1972, 109-110

\(^\text{12}\) Stuller, 2010, 29
heritage of a particular ruler or family. What we know of Norse mythology was not written down by the average Northern European, but recorded by Christian monks centuries after the myths were born.

The power behind our mythic narrative of superhero is dominated by two publishing companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Although other companies exist, they typically account for less than five percent of the superhero market. Of course, DC Comics is now owned by Warner Bros. and Marvel Comics is now with Disney. If we were to go further and further up the chain, we would discover that our mythic narrative of the superhero is controlled by a very small, very select group of individuals positioned to benefit and profit from the continuation of our myths, regardless if those myths continue to play a positive force in our American lives.
Chapter 2: The Goddesses of Mythology

Countless works regarding the relationship between comic books, religion, and mythology have been published. Grant Morrison recently published *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*. *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* by Chris Knowles explores the relationship between our superheroes and the occult. We also have *Holy Superheroes! Revised and Expanded Edition: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film*, *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, and *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Superheroes: Harnessing Our Power to Change the World*. Yet, beyond Wonder Woman, little is written about female characters individually, and there is no direct relation made between female superheroes and the divine. The world outside Western culture abounds with living traditions that worship a plethora of female deities. In fact, the three Abrahamic traditions appear to be the only religious systems to generally exclude divine as feminine.

When we examine the Goddesses that Western culture is most acquainted with we come to better understand the role of power in myth creation and perpetuation. Athena, Greek Goddess of Wisdom and War, is an apt prototype for our modern female superhero. She is often seen as a feminist goddess, strong in character and in body, independent and fierce, wise and rational.
Athena’s birth story is well known. Desiring Metis and her wisdom, Zeus wishes to copulate and marry this Titan Goddess. Having been told of prophecies that state that their offspring will be greater than him, Zeus consumes Metis, not realizing that she is pregnant with their child. Zeus’ consumption of Metis, a Goddess belonging to an older generation of divine beings, can be viewed more deeply as a new cultural system wishing to overtake the powers of the existing culture.

After consuming Metis, time passes and Zeus finds himself with a terrible, splitting headache. To relieve the pain, Hephaestus splits Zeus’ skull open. From the wound springs Athena, fully dressed, armored, and screaming her battle cry. While an examination of this story does indeed reveal that Athena was born of both a male and female parent, it is not often recognized as such. In fact, her birth is often recognized, by even Athena herself, as that of a parthenogenic birth from Zeus.

A denial of her mother, of her feminine origin, requires a great disrespect for one of women’s greatest mysteries. Women’s abilities to bleed each month and give birth are abilities only allowed women, mysteries unknown to the male. These abilities, regardless of their use or nonuse, are sacred feminine powers. To claim that Zeus holds the ability to give birth to Athena usurps this feminine power, creating yet another element to the patriarchal view of creation and the world.

Her birth and her subsequent virginal state have been used to envision this Goddess as the perfect female heir. Her virginal state can be interpreted as a means of tying Athena to only one male, her father. However, can it not be argued that her
virginal state reinforces the ideal of the feminist, a woman who is not required to answer to any male, who is not property of the male?

Within ancient Greek culture, women had very little freedom outside the home. Their education was often limited to the skills needed to run a household, and the teaching of women to read and write was considered a waste of time. Female citizens were raised to become wives, participating in marriages arranged by their fathers. The marital contract was not between wife and husband, but between the husband and the father of the bride. It could be viewed as a passing of property. Some would argue that Athena’s virginal state, her refusal to marry, allows her to be free of male dominance, but a closer examination of the Greek culture would show otherwise. By refusing to marry, Athena is not refusing to be the property of any man, she is refusing to be the property of any other man other than her father.

In examining the attributes of Athena, we find a goddess of wisdom, a goddess involved in politics and war, a rational and practical goddess. These qualities and attributes seem to fly in the face of the ancient Greek culture, where women were required to stay within their homes, were advised not to partake in the world of men, and who were considered emotional and unpredictable.

Athena is known for her love of tradition and social order. She is not known for revolutionary perspectives or riotous acts. These attributes lead to a goddess quite willing to support the patriarchal status quo. While she may be one of a small handful of female figures enjoying freedom beyond the home, she is not likely to pursue a change in the political or social structure to afford such a position to other females.
These images of Athena do not provide feminists with a Goddess to embody, but a woman partaking in the continuation of patriarchy through the rejection of self. While Athena may give modern women the courage to participate in political and intellectual realms, she models a form of doing so that does not bring about equality of the sexes. The new movement of defining women, of appreciating woman, cannot be supported by the worship or embodiment of Athena has she is commonly known.

Behind the well-known stories of Athena as the daughter of Zeus are older stories of Athena as parthenogenic daughter of Metis and evidence of Athena prior to the existence of Zeus. Other tales place Athena as the sister of Zeus, rather than his offspring. These accounts would provide an image of Athena as Goddess of Wisdom, inheriting this trait exclusively from the female. These depictions would grant women an original position within the realm of intellect and wisdom, as well as the body and material world. With these depictions, Athena and all women would share this intellectual would equally with that of men.

Delving even deeper into the pre-patriarchal world of Athena, one must also examine the meaning of virginity and Athena’s virginal status. Prior to the concerns of paternity, some scholars have argued that a virgin was not a female lacking experience in sexual intercourse, but instead a woman who refuses to act within patriarchal norms by devoting herself to one man and motherhood.

In this version of Athena, we can now see a goddess acting outside the norm, participating in sexual liaisons, appreciating her body and its desires willfully, embodying her femininity. If we acknowledge that the patrilineal system sought to control female
sexuality, through laws, traditions, and myths we now find ourselves with a Goddess who at one time was a supreme example of a feminist goddess, suffering the same fate as her female worshippers.

Clearly Goddesses do not guarantee equality of the sexes. Many Western feminists seeking a Goddess suited to their cause find themselves deeply attracted to the Hindu Goddess Kali. They see Kali as independent, brave, unrelenting, and not subject to any man. Rita Gross states, in regards to Hindu Goddesses, “Their ferocity is not at all frightening but is a model for our own strength and autonomy.”¹ That same ferocity can be found when Wonder Woman battles Cheetah, Jean Grey comes head to head with Mastermind, or Storm leads the X-Men.

Jeffrey Kripal provides a different view of Kali, stating that “she is everything that a woman should not be or, put differently, she is what a man most fears a woman secretly to be. Kali’s symbolism far from being “liberating” for South Asian women, is in fact often supportive of the very social and gender constructions that the feminist critique so justly attempts to overcome.”² In these living traditions, as in mainstream comic books, those in power create representations of female divine and hero and project patriarchy on these beings. Like Kali, our fierce female superheroes are a projection of the patriarchal perspective, a lesson in what a strong woman is like, and quite often how to control her and manipulate her for the benefit of men.

¹ Gross, 2000
² Kripal, 2000
The Virgin Mary stands as another example of the creation of Goddess for the benefit of patriarchy. The Eastern Orthodox religion refers to Mary as the Theotokos, the God-bearer and the one who gives birth to God. Roman Catholicism and Anglicans refer to her as Mother of God. While she may be granted the status of the Mother of God, church dogma only granted the status of Mother of God Incarnate. According to the church, she is not the eternal mother of God the Father, but only the bearer of God in his physical form as Jesus. Regardless of dogma, Roman Catholics venerate Mary, featuring her in prayers, art, music, and daily life. For Roman Catholics, Mary is Mediatrix, Co-Redemptrix, and Queen of Heaven. Yet, the church stands firm in denying Mary the title of Goddess.

Mary is a result of patriarchy, regardless of her accessibility. Her status of forever pure, giving birth and living life without the pleasures of sexual intercourse (as perceived within Catholicism), without a complete experience of her feminine body, only serves to enclose her in the patriarchal domination of the feminine body. Her imagery plays into the virgin/whore dichotomy used to suppress female sexuality within our culture.

While the ruling class often creates and sustains a culture’s mythology, mythology can also be a tool of change. The feminist movement tells a story of a time when a Mother Goddess was worshipped everywhere. According to this myth, matriarchal societies revered this Goddess and created peaceful and loving cultures. Then the patriarchal Indo-Europeans descended upon the land and the Goddess, and all that was sacred to her, was raped, brutalized, and killed. This is the story passed from
one spiritual feminist to another, a story to legitimize the worship of the Goddess in a culture saturated in the “one and only one” God mentality.

This particular story of a Goddess can be found in books by Marija Gimbutas, Merlin Stone, Carol Christ, Sir James Frazer, Margaret Murray, and Robert Graves, and popularized for some by Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade*. This is a story of hope, a story that tells us that women can be powerful, that women can be leaders. It is a story that shapes a movement and provides a basis for viewing feminine as sacred. The story is told and retold within the feminist spirituality movement because of its ability to provide a mythic narrative that rings true in the heart of a cultural movement, lending it the passion to move forward as a dissenting voice against the powers that be. It is a story that has little, if any, historical evidence to back it up.

Yet the ancient history of Goddesses, whether from pre-historic times or Ancient Greece, makes little difference. We have about as much historical evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ and the Abrahamic God as we do for a pre-historic, matriarchal, Goddess-centered culture. The myths of Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and other biblical characters continue not because we know for certain they existed but because of the cultural importance of their stories, values, lessons, and attitudes they impart to us. The value of the story of Jesus is the limitlessness of the Christian God’s love, not that Jesus was actually born in a manger. The value of Abraham is in his undying faith, not that he was the founding father of Judaism. The value of the matriarchal Goddess of pre-history is in seeing female as sacred, not the historical existence of a global female-centered
culture. Myths do not “need to be true- or even necessarily be believed to be true- to be powerful, to make a difference in how people think and live, and in what people value.”

As we study modern mythology within comic books, we must closely examine the depiction of female superheroes as embodiments of modern Goddesses. As modes of mythic narratives, comic books move beyond the realm of written or spoken word and communicate directly to our highly visual culture. Conflicts between the written depiction of heroes and their visual representations can negate any attempts to create alternatives to patriarchal Goddesses. The visual and narrative depiction of female superheroes provides us with a clear understanding of their purpose. As we continue to explore female heroes in the rest of this paper we must ask ourselves if Wonder Woman, Bat Girl, and Invisible Woman are tools of the patriarchal culture, benefitting those already in power, or catalysts for change.

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3 Eller, 2000, 6
Chapter 3: Comic Books as Modern Mythology

Most scholars of modern mythology would agree that mythology arises out of the context of its culture and exists within all cultures. Culture creates mythology, and in turn, mythology creates culture, a cycle repeated eternally. Mythology’s cultural context can provide an outsider with a view of the attitudes and beliefs of another culture, although it is observed from her own cultural viewpoints and interpretations. What we believe we know about the lives, attitudes, and philosophies of ancient Rome, we often derive from their myths, passed down from generation to generation. What we have learned about the people of ancient Greece are filtered through Homer, Hesiod, and Sophocles. We are so fascinated by ancient Greece that we continue to rehash their stories, through movies that retell their myths, like *Clash of the Titans* and *The Immortals*, and by reinterpretations of the myths in modern times, such as Rick Riordan’s popular children’s book series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*.

Our reinterpretations continue with comic book superheroes. In *Holy Superheroes*, Greg Garrett states,

Comics superheroes have a massive family tree that spreads its branches wide throughout Western culture and history. If you’re wondering how characters in long underwear and capes became our archetypal heroes, the answer is that they represent a sort of culmination to centuries of storytelling, history, and heroism. Our
American superheroes are equal parts demigods from Greek myth, strongmen and prophets from the Judeo-Christian tradition, literary lions and characters from folktales, and pop culture traditions.¹

The comic book superhero is an integral piece of myth created by American culture. The superhero provided Americans with a means to cope with the fear and desperation that resulted from a world at war and the attempted annihilation of an entire people. Super-powered individuals took on evil of every sort and triumphed, reminding us that good would always prevail. Re-emerging during the civil rights era and second-wave feminist movement, superheroes, as mutants, triumphed over discrimination and bigotry. Superheroes exploded onto the big screen when terrorists took to the skies and killed thousands of innocents in 2001.

Superheroes are mythic narratives that guide Americans in our understanding of truth, justice, and the American way. Their trials and triumphs are allegories of the fears and obstacles faced by every American; their actions guide us in knowing right from wrong, just from unjust, heroic from coward. The power of this mythic narrative provides us with a guiding force for viewing ourselves within society, the rules and norms of our culture, and our expected attitudes and behaviors. In providing this outline, the superhero narrative shapes our present and our future, creating a system in which the culture develops and persists. The superhero comic book tells us what America is and should be, and what Americans are and should become.

¹ Garrett, 2008, 10
Comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” ²

In the 1930’s, newspaper strips were placed into collections, giving us the first comic books. At first, people of all ages and genders read comic books, enjoying stories of war, romance, and horror. It wasn’t until the creation of the superhero that the age of comic book readers began to drop.

Given birth in 1938 by two seventeen year-old Jewish boys, the superhero³ rose from 64 full-color pages to become our inspiration of goodness, justice, strength, and the potentiality of all humans. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joseph Shuster, Superman appeared in *Action Comics* #1 as a hero who could leap 1/8³ of a mile, hurdle a twenty story building, and run faster than an express train. His instant popularity was a combination of the use of the four-color printing process and his mild-mannered alter ego, Clark Kent.⁴

Superman arrived on Earth as a small child from a distant planet named Krypton, a planet that had just been destroyed. His Kryptonian name, Kal-El, means “All that is God” in Hebrew and reflects his connection to Jewish mythology. Much like Moses, Kal-El is sent upon a life raft, arriving in a foreign land, attempting to fit where he does not,

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² Pustz, 2000, 9

³ Packer provides a detailed definition of “superhero” on pages 77-78 of *Superheroes and Superegos*. (Packer, 2010)

⁴ Clark Kent, as bumbling reporter, provided the reader with an every-day man, someone they could in fact relate to as potentially themselves. This ability to connect to Ken, who is also a super hero, allowed the readers to imagine themselves capable of great heroic acts.
and ultimately saving his people, although in the case of Superman, his adopted people. His role as savior and sole survivor comes at a time when two American Jewish boys were witnessing the persistent genocide of Jews across Europe. In the cultural past, Moses led the Jews out of slavery. Siegel and Shuster created a mythical hero to once again save the Jewish people.

Over time, Superman’s relevance to Jewish mythology is replaced with references to Christianity and his Christ-like properties. Like Jesus Christ, Superman does not take on his full responsibilities until adulthood, and in the 1990’s he is killed and resurrected. In Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow, Alan Moore referenced an empty vault containing Superman’s remains, while in the film Superman Returns, Superman is beaten and brutalized, stabbed in the side, dies, and is reborn. Although the stories of Superman and Jesus Christ do not match perfectly, Superman sets the standard for the continuation of mythic themes in future comic books, illustrating the relevance of mythic narrative in lifting the human spirit above atrocity and the power of the hero.

By 1939, comic book readers were introduced to Batman, when he debuted in Detective Comics as an amalgamation of popular culture sources. In the same year, Timely Comics premiered the title Marvel Comics with two characters who personified nature, the Human Torch and Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner. Future Marvel Comics

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5 Garret, 2008, 19

6 Timely Comics was the earliest comic book branch of American publisher Martin Goodman and later became Marvel Comics in the 1960’s.
characters would provide readers with a more obvious relationship between ancient mythology and superheroes. Hawkman, a reincarnation of an Egyptian prince, closely resembled the animal-headed Gods of Ancient Egypt. Green Lantern became a modern version of Aladdin and the lamp, and Flash, the first accidental superhero, was a modern day Mercury.  

The first occult, or Hermetic, hero appeared in 1940. Billy Batson, a young orphaned boy, was approached by a stranger in a trench coat and slouched hat and asked to follow the stranger into a nearby train station, where a fantastical and futuristic train appeared. Hopping onboard the train, Billy is taken to a magical plane of existence and discovers he was chosen to replace a retiring wizard. When he speaks the wizard’s name, SHAZAM, Billy transforms into Captain Marvel, a version of his fully realized human potential. Through the use of this word, the comic book illustrates the mythological and mythical properties of the spoken word, and the name in particular holds great meaning. SHAZAM is actually an acronym for Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury, all of whom contribute specific characteristics to Billy’s transformation.

The year 1941 marked a significant point in comic book history as the birth year of Wonder Woman. While not the first female superhero, Wonder Woman has become the longest running female-centered comic book in existence. William Moulton

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7 Morrison, 2011, 28-29

8 For a more in-depth look at the history of Wonder Woman, as well as her image as a feminist icon, see Wonder Women by Lillian S. Robinson.
Marston, famed inventor of the polygraph, created Wonder Woman as his answer to what he perceived as the over-masculinization of the comic book superhero genre. Marston wished to create a superhero who triumphed over the world with love rather than violence, and it was his wife Elizabeth who insisted that hero be a woman.

According to an article in the 1943 issue of *The American Scholar*, Marston is quoted as saying,

> Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.9

Cited as the first feminist superhero, Wonder Woman was created in the confines of patriarchy. The use of the term “good women” in the above quote is the first indication. Wonder Woman, by her very nature as a strong woman could not be considered a “good woman” and she must still be beautiful in order for any young girl to aspire to become her.

Wonder Woman is an Amazon Princess named Diana, born and raised on a peaceful island in the Bermuda Triangle inhabited only by women. While these women

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9 Marston, 1943
live in a utopian society, they quite often perform acts of strength, speed, and aggression, with gladiatorial contests meant to highlight the skills of their greatest warriors.

Wonder Woman’s fictitious origin harkens back to a dispute between Ares, Greek God of War, and Aphrodite, Greek Goddess of Love. Ares argued that men would rule the world with violence while Aphrodite believed women would rule the world with love. Convinced that she is correct, Aphrodite creates a race of super-powered women and provides them with the girdle of invincibility. However, Hercules seduces their Queen, Hippolyta, and after their city is destroyed, Aphrodite removes these women to Paradise Island where they create a world just for women.

Of course, without men, the women are without children and begin to mourn their loss. Athena helps Hippolyta model a girl child from clay while Aphrodite bestows the image with life and names the child Diana. Raised among the women of Paradise Island, Diana grows into a beautiful and competent young woman. When she reaches adulthood, the world outside Paradise Island is at war, and an Army pilot named Steve Trevor crashes on the island sanctuary.

Diana saves Steve, bringing him back from death, while Aphrodite and Athena urge Hippolyta to send an Amazon to assist America in fighting the war against democracy and women’s equal rights. The Amazons hold a contest for the job and Diana disguises herself in order to participate. She ultimately wins, but her intentions are not to rid the world of evil. Instead, she wishes only to stay by the side of the man she has fallen in love with.
She dons her flag-patterned costume, and returns Steve to America, dropping him off at a hospital so he can receive treatment, at which point Steve refers to her as his “wonder woman.” While at the hospital, Diana comes across an army nurse who is more than willing to hand over her life and persona to a stranger, and Diana is now set with a secret identity that provides her with continued access to Steve.

One of the most unique aspects of Wonder Woman at the time, and for much of comic book history, was the inclusion of a cast of females who assisted Wonder Woman in her endeavors. More than mere sidekicks, the Holliday Girls were intelligent and independent women of their own, so much so that they instilled a fear of lesbianism in Fredric Wertham, who considered Wonder Woman a “frightening image” for boys and penned the comic revolutionizing text Seduction of the Innocent. It appears that Wertham believed a group of young and attractive women who successfully fought crime without the help of a man was dangerous.

Wertham’s book lead to the creation of the Comics Magazine Association of America’s Comics Code, which set about to restrict the art and writing within comic books. Between the creation of the code and the death of Marston, Wonder Woman quickly moved away from her so-called feminist image and inspirational role to a much more “acceptable” woman.

Wonder Woman’s role as a crusader for all that is right in the world soon came second to her love life, and her powers were directed more toward law enforcement rather than saving the world. In the late 1950’s a version of Wonder Woman as a teen is
introduced to the reader as Wonder Girl and she is often preoccupied with dating and boys, the cultural ideal for a female teen’s focus.

In the 1960’s, Wonder Woman chooses to sacrifice her powers in order to remain part of man’s world. In doing so she becomes a boutique owner and finds a male mentor in the martial art of I Ching. Under his guidance, Diana becomes a master at martial arts and weaponry and continues her adventures. She regains her powers due to her popularity on the small screen, and rejoins the Justice League, this time as more than just a secretary.\(^{10}\)

The most dramatic recent change to Wonder Woman is the revelation that she was not a child molded from clay, but a result of Hippolyta’s affair with the god Zeus. Current writers felt that readers would be confused idea of only one parent being involved in reproduction.\(^ {11}\) Ironically, our culture seems to have no trouble with a male deity giving rise to life all on his own.\(^ {12}\)

\(^{10}\) When Wonder Woman first attempted to join the Justice Society of America, her membership was denied, yet she was able to volunteer as the group’s secretary. While the male superheroes went off to fight WWII, Wonder Woman wistfully says, “Good luck, boys – and I wish I could be going with you!”

\(^{11}\) The recent launch of *New 52* allowed creators to provide new origin stories, including Wonder Woman. Jill Pantozzi reported that Brian Azaerello and Cligg Chiang had decided to give Wonder Woman a father, namely Zeus. While this elevates Diana to the status of demigod, it also now diminishes the independent status of the Amazonian Women. (Pantozzi, 10/10/2011)

\(^{12}\) Myths of children born of Goddesses through parthenogenesis are common in ancient Western traditions, as well as living traditions from around the world. Parvati, a Hindu Goddess, is said to create Ganesha from the dirt of her body. The Greek Goddesses Nyx and Gaia are both said to have created children through parthenogenesis. Prior to the worship of Zeus, the cult of Leto may have worshipped her ability to conceive life, particularly that of Artemis, without the assistance of a male.
While Wonder Woman may be the longest running female superhero, she is by no means alone. Yet, a very unscientific poll on Facebook revealed that many of my friends were hard-pressed to even name a female comic book hero beyond Wonder Woman. However, the comic book world is heavily populated with both female heroes and villains.

Many of the first female superheroes were created as partners for existing male heroes. These women, included Hawkman’s Hawkgirl, Bulletman’s Bulletgirl, The Flame’s Flamegirl, and Rocketman’s Rocket girl, were almost always girlfriends of the heroes, usually fought crime to prove their love, and were never referred to as women.

Mary Marvel, a new female superhero, arrived in 1942. While she may have been a spinoff like so many others, she was a sister rather than girlfriend and managed a loyal following of her very own. The story goes that Billy discovers a long-lost twin sister and reveals his secret identity to her. Mary is soon granted her own powers upon speaking the word SHAZAM, although her powers come from Selena, Hippolyta, Ariadne, Zephyrus, Aurora, and Minerva. While Billy turns into the adult Captain Marvel after speaking the magical word, Mary simply turns into Mary with a red mini-skirt and a lightning bolt on her chest. Her preteen status cements her diminished role next to the adult Captain Marvel.

Batwoman immerged in 1956 as Kathy Kane a circus aerialist and motorcycle stunt rider determined to follow in Batman’s footsteps. She built her own Batcave and put on a costume, although hers was a bright yellow leotard with a red cape. Now doesn’t that just invoke “bat” to you? Batwoman’s main objective, however, was to
fight the rumored homosexual relationship between Batman and Robin. Ironically, when Batwoman reappears in 2006, she is a lesbian.

In 1958, Jimmy Olsen wished for a cute helper for Superman and a fully grown, magically produced, Super-Girl appears. She creates too much friction, with the possibility of a love triangle between Superman, Lois Lane, and herself and soon becomes Supergirl, a preteen cousin of Superman. Throughout the 1960’s, Supergirl is portrayed as the good girl pop princess, the girl every girl should grow up to be. Her storylines focus heavily on boys and marriage, and her sales decline. She is eventually revived, but still remains the girl who is never allowed to grow up.

Marvel Comic’s first female superhero debuted in November of 1961 as part of The Fantastic Four. Sue Storm joins her boyfriend, Reed Richard, his friend, Ben Grimm, and her brother, Johnny Storm, on a fateful space journey that exposes each of them to cosmic rays that alter their physiological make-up. Given the host of powers and abilities that could be granted each character, it is ironic that the woman of the group was granted the power of invisibility.

The 1960’s saw the creation of additional female superheroes. DC comics, in an attempt to spice up the Batman television show, gave us Batgirl. Marvel introduced us to The Wasp of the Avengers and Marvel Girl (aka Jean Grey) of the X-Men. Sadly, Marvel’s women were often quick to leave behind their hero status and take up married life. Invisible Woman became the working mother, attempting to have it all while doing it all; a clear indication that it was fine to be a female hero as long as you were also a mother.
Each of these characters has endured the last fifty years. A complete look at the history of female superheroes is a book onto itself and best completed by others.\textsuperscript{13} What is of interest for this work is how these female superheroes embody modern Western mythology and what they tell us of our attitudes toward the feminine divine, and ultimately our attitudes regarding women.

\textsuperscript{13} Supergirls by Mike Madrid was instrumental in understanding the history of female superheroes presented here.
Reigniting a lost interest in comic books for the sake of my son is how I managed to find myself sitting at my dining room table at 6:00 in the morning engaged in the most important conversation in my household. Could Jean Grey of the X-Men comic books beat the Incredible Hulk if they should ever come head-to-head? This was a conversation that had taken place countless times before; as I attempted to back my car into the garage, as I paid at the grocery store check-out, even as we sat playing UNO at the airport. This particular debate had raged for 3 of the 10 years of my son’s life.

Of course, he asked me if Wolverine, Superman, or Spider-Man could beat Hulk, as well. Hulk’s status as the best and strongest is extremely important as he has been my son’s favorite hero since he was capable of pointing to characters on a comic book page. But none of those discussions ever became as heated or intense as our debate on Jean Grey’s ability to stomp Hulk. While I was willing to lose the debates on Wolverine, something within me insisted that I not give up on my argument that Hulk stood little to no chance of beating Jean. Each time this debate would arise, I couldn’t help but picture the faces of the boys in elementary school that I had beaten in a race.

Every girl knows that look, the one where the boy realizes he now has to live down the shame of being beaten by a girl. As my son intensely defended Hulk’s awesome powers, I could not help but hear in his statements, “Hulk can’t be beaten by a girl.” It didn’t matter to him that Jean Grey is gifted with telekinesis, allowing her to
create force fields and levitate, or “fly.” It didn’t matter to him that Jean is the most powerful telepath on the planet and could scramble Hulk’s brain beyond repair. It didn’t matter to him that Jean was once powerful enough to consume a sun and destroy an entire solar system. “Hulk smash” must prevail.

These debates allowed me to dig deeply into the messages my son was receiving outside my home, messages that I had little to no control over. These messages were adamant that boys were stronger than girls, boys were faster than girls, and boys should never lose to a girl. These messages clearly stated that if a girl was good at something, particularly anything physical, she was measured against the male normative. She was good when she was “as good as” a boy.

The world of comic book superheroes is rich with this mindset. Its greatest female heroes, such as Wonder Woman and Supergirl, are contrasted against the powers and abilities of their male counterparts, if not outright relying on the men for their powers, such as Mary Marvel. This portrayal has sent a powerful message to my son. I redirected that early morning conversation, because I knew I would get nowhere, and I asked my son why in just one year we had five movies about male comic book

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1 Androcentrism, refers to the collapse of the male and human norm in which everything is judged or perceived through the male perspective and applies to the “male” normative within a particular culture. To learn more about androcentrism, see Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on women and religion by Rita Gross.

2 In one incarnation of Mary Marvel, Mary and Billy share the same power source, and Mary cannot draw on this power without diminishing Captain Marvel’s powers.
superheroes but Wonder Woman, one of the longest running comic book superheroes, still didn’t have a movie. He was insightful enough to answer, “Because she is a girl.”

The only response I could muster at so early in the morning was, “Yep, and how stupid is that?”

Just about every website and blog devoted to comic books, particularly those that published articles on DC’s recent release of the New 52, has witnessed heated debates regarding the portrayal of women in comic books. Here are just three examples of responses to the recent debate.

Grey – “They (female characters) are inherently sexualized, because they are of a different sex, and more or less, designed to be... well... sexy.”

Joshua – “Let me be frank I don't care. If you don't like it don't read it. How hard is that? If you really want to see things done your way stop crying about it and make your own comic publishing company. Who knows you may be the next Marvel/Dc a big hit! Or you can be like WNBA and no one will pay any attention to you. It's there book and if they want to make it man's fantasy land then so be it. I am so...so tired of haveing upright whiny girls bitch and complain about what guys like. How it makes them "feel bad", like I said I don't care. My goal in life isn't to make sure your happy or feel good but that I do. To

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3 The year 2011 saw such superhero films as The Green Hornet, The Mighty Thor, X-Men: First Class, Green Lantern, and Captain America.
that end I look for things I like and avoid they things I don't. I don't go a R horror movie and then say its to scary and violent and they should make it like G movie. You know why cus its not there fault it would be mine. It's mine because I should be smart enough to know the R horror movie wasn't made for me or people with my taste in movies. The smart thing to do would be to find the movie that fits me not bitch about the ones that don't. You may say but there are so few choices. I say have you every wondered why that is? Let me help you out...the vast majority doesn’t care. Comic companies that do books the way you would like them don't last long. There is no money in targeting your audience. Tho man fantasies as you put it have made a lot of money soo...why would they care what you think? There makeing money doing what they want to do for the people they want to do it for. If that's not you that's just to damn bad. You have the right to make books the way you want for the people want, then you can see how they sell. :) I'm guessing not that well and that's why The Big Two , most people and myself don't care. It's are fantasy if you don't like I don't care you can leave.”

David – “I've never understood how women seeking a culture which accepts them as sexually liberated could not have seen this coming. To
insist on one's right to be sexual is to pave the way to being sexualized."^4

Of course we could discount these comments based on their grammatical errors alone. However, the views expressed by these three readers are blasted across the web countless times over and effectively demean and disregard the women and men who attempt an intelligent discourse on the subject.\(^5\) To continue a discussion on women in comic books we must first face these attitudes head on, and move beyond their limitations; to do otherwise will only continue to leave you as the reader wondering why this all matters in the first place.

The blogger Dr. Nerdlove, who is devoted to helping nerds get the girl, recently published an article on his blog Calling Dr. Nerdlove entitled “Nerds and Male Privilege.”^6\) He begins the post with a story about taking a particular girlfriend into his beloved comic book shop and why that happened exactly once. Her experience was similar to that of many women in the comic book culture, in that her breasts appeared to be incredibly fascinating but her opinion did not.

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^4 Three responses to the article “The Big Sexy Problem with Superheroines and Their ‘Liberated Sexuality’” that appeared on Comics Alliance. (Hudson, 9/22/2011). Comments are presented as posted by commenters.

^5 Kelly Thomspn addresses similar comments on her post “No, It’s Not Equal” on her regular Comic Book Resources Column She Has No Head!. Her post dissects the body types, clothing, beauty, and posing differences within comic books. (Thompson, 2/22/2011).

^6 Dr. Nerdlove, 11/28/2011
Dr. Nerdlove uses this story to open a discussion on the existence of male privilege in comic book fandom. According to him male privilege is “the idea that men – most often straight, white men – as a whole, get certain privileges and status because of their gender.” The way in which women are portrayed in comic books is one result of male privilege, as well as the defensiveness that occurs when a critique on the issue arises. Women just need to just be happy that they are represented at all and “denials, justifications, and outright dismissal of the issue” occur if the portrayal of women is suggested as sexist. This happens often enough that a Bingo Card\(^7\) exists that covers the most common responses.

Male privilege leads to the idea that there is “nothing wrong with fandom and that suggestions that it might benefit from some diversity is treated as a threat.” What is the threat? Dr. Nerdlove believes that there is a fear that fandom will no longer cater exclusively to heterosexual men, but will consider the needs and desires of gays, lesbians, racial and religious minorities, and even women. Essentially, the privileged will no longer be so privileged.

How does this affect women? Geek girls are considered women first and fans second. This means they are treated differently simply because they are women. The

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\(^7\) The Bingo card copied verbatim slurs and language often used to defend sexism in video games. Comments ranged from “But it’s not FOR women. If they can’t deal with it, they shouldn’t be here” to “Girls who like video games? You only have interests because you’re not thin enough to have a real boyfriend” and “There are women who get their genitals ritually mutilated and you’re complaining about video game boobies?” (Terri, 11/3/2011)
white heterosexual male’s opinion will never be dismissed simply because of his gender.

Dr. Nerdlove states,

The most common responses a woman can expect in an argument – especially online – is that she’s fat, ugly, single, jealous, a whore, or a lesbian – or any combination thereof – and therefore her opinion is irrelevant, regardless of its actual merits. This is especially true if she’s commenting on the portrayal of female characters, whether in comics, video games or movies.

Of course, this is the experience of geek girls who will just not go away. We already know that few women immerse themselves in the comic book culture. Does the male privilege of nerds really affect those outside the world of comic books?

In 2002, *Spider-Man* the major motion picture was released by Columbia Pictures and resulted in more than $82,000,000 in worldwide box office sales and two sequels. *Captain America* was released in the summer of 2011 and experienced a domestic gross sales figure of more than $175,000,000. The little known Marvel character Thor (an excellent example of the relationship between comic books and mythology) received more than $180,000,000 in domestic gross sales. While comic book fans might view these films more than once, it is obvious that almost everyone in Western culture is somehow touched by comic books and their superheroes. If you don’t believe me, then

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8 As reported on The Numbers - http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2002/SPIDR.php
9 As reported on The Numbers - http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2011/CAPAM.php
10 As reported on The Numbers - http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2011/THOR.php
you would have to deny having ever heard the phrases “With great power there must also come great responsibility” and “It’s a bird...It’s a plane... It’s Superman.” Or perhaps you were not with me when I visited Jordan Creek Town Center and noticed an advertisement for women’s bathing suits (Fig4) in the window of Spencer’s Gifts.
Figure 4: Photo taken by author outside Spencer’s Gifts retail store at Jordan Creek Town Center in West Des Moines, Iowa.
With the prevalence of comic book superheroes in print, film, video games, bathing suits, Halloween costumes (Fig. 5) and even lunch boxes, girls and women outside the fan culture are coming into contact with images of the female superhero, although not as main characters in any of these popular culture sources. Although a search of psychology and gender studies journals did not provide scholarly papers that directly analyzed the representations of the female body in superhero comics and their effect on culture, I located numerous articles regarding similar forms of media, such as video games and television.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps this is an unsupported leap, but I would guess that the findings of these studies would be similar to any with comic books.

\textbf{Figure 5:} Screen Capture from Party City Website found at http://www.partycity.com/category/halloween+costumes/girls+costumes+accessories/girls+superheroes+costumes.do. Viewed on 03/31/12. Of Particular interest are the pink versions available for the Batgirl and Spider-girl costumes.

\textsuperscript{11} Martins; 2007; Grabe, 2008; Dohnt, 2006
Elizabeth A. Daniels of the University of California at Los Angeles conducted an experimental study on the non-sexualized and sexualized image of female performance athletes with 350 adolescent girls and 225 college women. Given the physicality of both female athletes and female supermodels, this particular study is enlightening to the topic at hand. This study examined how images of performance athletes, sexualized athletes, sexualized models, and non-sexualized models affected the participants’ tendency to self-objectify. Daniels found that the images of women performing as athletes prompted less self-objectification. Her findings suggest that there is a greater need for performance images, rather than sexualized images, of athletes in order to combat body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls and young women. To expand to the comic book genre, female readers would likely benefit from greater exposure of images of their female heroes performing as heroes in non-sexualized poses and depictions.12

Other studies reiterated that the images of women portrayed in video games and television were presented as the normal and expected female form, regardless that these bodies are often thinner than the criteria of anorexia. Beyond being thin, these images often fall within the presentation of “curvaceously thin,” with hips and waists far below the average woman in the United States, and breasts far larger.

Given that breasts are composed predominately of body fat, this thin frame with medium-sized breasts is not only contradictory, but promotes excessive dieting, body

12 Daniels, 2009
dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem, and body altering surgeries. Kirsten Harrison found that exposure to television representations of the curvaceously thin resulted in a positive correlation for the approval of body-altering surgeries, such as liposuction and breast enhancement, for women by both female and male study participants. Female comic book superheroes are portrayed even more unrealistically (Fig 6 & 7) than most females in popular culture, and future studies determining the correlation of body satisfaction and comic book exposure is needed to determine the extent that the exaggerated forms have on men and women.

13 Harrison, 2003
Figure 6: Cover image of PowerGirl No. 12, The Little Things!. Published 7/2010 by DC Comics. [link](http://www.comicvine.com/power-girl-the-little-things/37-216212/)

The Comics Magazine Association of America’s Comics Code revisions from 1954 state that “females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical
qualities.”¹⁴ This is restated in the revisions of 1971, but missing from the latest edition of the code. Comic artists have taken advantage of this omission, illustrated by an eHow.com website that provides the reader with instructions on How to Draw Beautiful Comic Book Women. According to the author of the article one should “exaggerate the good parts. There is almost no exaggeration of the comic book female anatomy that won’t be excused, if the exaggeration occurs in the right places. Busty chests, swooping hips and impossibly tiny waists are 3 basic ingredients you need to add when drawing women in comic books.”¹⁵

The increased focus on exaggerating the “right” places on the female superhero illustrates the recurring message slapped on magazine covers and television screens. This message is what Naomi Wolf has entitled “The Beauty Myth.” This Beauty Myth “is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact.”¹⁶ In her work, Wolf points to the phenomenon that has stalled the feminist progressive movement. As the movement moves forward in legal and political matters, eating disorders and cosmetic surgery increase exponentially. The extreme focus on female beauty serves as a “backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon

¹⁴ Links to the original 1974, the 1971, and the 1989 versions of the Comics Code can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics_Code_Authority

¹⁵ eHow Contributor

¹⁶ Wolf, 2002, 12
against women’s achievement” and keeps women focused on competing for resources appropriated and defined by men.\textsuperscript{17}

Within this beauty myth is the commodification of the female body. Commodification transforms goods, services, ideas, and entities into marketable items to satisfy particular wants and needs. The commodification of the female body makes an object that sells a product or service, and produces profit through control and oppression. In Western culture, female bodies sell everything from alcohol and automobiles to diet drinks and superhero comic books.

The commodification of the female body often results in fragmented bodies - a dismembered leg selling us a shoe, a woman with a bottle of alcohol for a head, or one who transforms into a motorcycle. The launch of DC’s New 52 featured a relaunch of the \textit{Catwoman} title that generated a backlash from many fans. The first issue of \textit{Catwoman} introduced the character through two pages of fragmented images of breasts and body parts and nothing else (Fig. 8).

\textsuperscript{17} Wolf, 2002, Pg. 12
Laura Mulvey’s discourse on the pleasure derived from looking and its impact on the female body in film apply aptly to the visual medium of comic books, in particular those featuring art such as we see above.

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the
device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude.\textsuperscript{18}

Scholars of comic books and comic book fans have debated the hyper-sexualization of female superheroes. Some argue these hyper-sexualized characters are a result of female empowerment and women embracing their sexuality, rather than a result of the continued appeasement of the male gaze. I refer to you back to the commenter named David earlier in this paper. Laura Hudson, Editor-in-Chief of \textit{Comics Alliance}, disagrees when she says,

But this is what comics like this [New 52 relaunch of \textit{Catwoman}] tell me about myself, as a lady: They tell me that I can be beautiful and powerful, but only if I wear as few clothes as possible... They tell me I can be sexually adventurous and pursue my physical desires, as long as I do it in ways that feel inauthentic and contrived to appeal to men and kind of creep me out. When I look at these images, that is what I hear.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Mulvey, 1975

\textsuperscript{19} Hudson, 9/22/2011
Hudson’s comment highlights the confusion between being sexual and being a sex object. Hyper-sexualization leads to women with body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, not confident, strong, and sexually independent women. Hyper-sexualization also creates an environment where violence against women and girls is legitimized or exacerbated and contributes to anti-women attitudes among men and boys.20

Female superheroes, while capable of great feats of heroic action, are often acted upon. When allowed to be powerful, women are often reduced to the experience of rape, decapitation, and destruction, as evidenced in the myths of heroes conquering the dragon, gorgons, and snakes of the ancient world. Sadly, the world of comic books is not immune to this treatment of female heroes. Gail Simone, prior to joining DC Comic’s writing staff, created a website titled Women in Refrigerators.

The website consists of a list Simone created when she began to realize that many female characters in comic books have rather unhealthy lives. Quite often, these super-powered women underwent brutal murders, maiming, disempowerment, and rape. In several cases, the characters experienced not just one brutality, but all of them. Wonder Woman has been killed, revived, and lost her powers. Storm of the X-Men has been depowered, repowered, and written as crazy on more than one occasion. Starfire has been raped, tortured, enslaved, and forced into marriage twice. Power Girl has been depowered and magically impregnated. Ms. Marvel has experienced mind-

20 Hatton and Trautner, 2011
control, impregnation through rape, powers and memories stolen, de-powered, and alcoholism. The list goes on.

Simone’s website allows comic book creators to respond to this issue. Joe Quesada’s response highlights the dollar sign’s importance, stating some creators develop characters simply to “to be exploited and exploitative” as that is what seems to be selling books. Steve Englehart stated, “The answer to your question is pretty simple: Ever since the original Captain Marvel/Superman, most comics *characters* have been arrested male adolescents, because most comics readers are male adolescents. And male adolescents fear strong women.”

Male superheroes do not have an easy life either. Superman comes from a planet that is destroyed. Batman watches his parents murdered. The tragedies they experience are the hardships and obstacles they battle in becoming a hero. Yet, John Bartol, argued that there is a profound difference between the hardships experienced by male and female superheroes. In a post entitle “Dead Men Defrosting” Bartol and the WiR team list a number of male characters who have experienced tragedies and hardship, including Hal Jordan as Green Lantern murdering millions during a spate of insanity, Iron Man’s battle with alcoholism, and the many male heroes who have died (many of who have been resurrected). Bartol then goes on to state,

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21 Of course, male characters also undergo traumatic experiences. Peter David noted, “But certainly there’s any number of dead or disrupted male characters as well.” David’s response would be what Dr. Nerdlove defines as deflection, showing the oppressor as also oppressed. For more details on the oppression of the oppressor, see Marilyn Frye’s chapter on oppression in The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory.
The fundamental difference I have seen is that the majority of male heroes, and especially our Dead Men Defrosting, are introduced to the reader with a situation or condition they must overcome. Female heroes, too, go through this; we meet them in the beginning of their tale with something about them that will play a role in their formation as heroes. But later, those same women heroes are altered again and never allowed, as male heroes usually are, the chance to return to their original heroic states.22

While the tragic lives of the male superheroes allow them to follow the path of transformation from ordinary man to hero, the same transformation does not occur for their female counterparts. Rather than leading the female characters through a complete journey of transformation, the tragedies continuously create a cycle of disempowerment and the hero’s quest is never completed.

The portrayal of superhero as a sex object consistently disempowered and stuffed in refrigerators leads to the very question of their ability to be a hero. Richard Reynolds, in Superheroes: A Modern Mythology, asks, “How can women who dress up in the styles of 1940’s pornography be anything other than the pawns or tools of male fantasy?”23 This is not an uncommon question. Jamie McKelvie, of the comic book Generation Hope, stated in a recent article on Comic Alliance,

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23 Reynolds, 1992, 79
There is an argument that it's OK to draw women in this hyper-idealized and sexualized way, because male characters are idealized too. The difference is, more often than not, women are idealized primarily in a sexual manner, and men are idealized in a way that emphasizes power and strength. These are not the same thing, and send a distinct message to the reader whether you realize it or not.\textsuperscript{24}

The argument of justifying the hyper-sexualized female comic book based on the presence of the hyper-idealized male form cannot be so easily discounted as a false equivalent and disregarded. I will not argue that the hyper-idealized form of the male superhero cancels out the impact of the hyper-sexualized female, as their imagery do not result in equal forms of oppression, nor does the hyper-idealized form of the male result in oppression at all. Rather, the presence of the hyper-idealized male form, and its impact on boys and men, highlight the very power of our mythic narrative, and the power of those controlling the narrative.

While the idealized male superhero form presents challenges for boys and men, the sexualized images of female superheroes can also present negative personal affects for male readers. Interestingly, a study by Lavine, Sweeney, and Wagner indicates a correlation between television ads that portray women as sex objects and decreased body dissatisfaction in both female and male study participants. Lavine, Sweeney, and Wagner theorized that the

\textsuperscript{24} Hudson, 10/19/2011
female sex object subtype heightens men’s beliefs that women are flirtatious and seductive, this may increase the salience of the perceived characteristics of men (e.g., a muscular physique) to which women are attracted. Thus, such ads may increase men’s awareness of and concerns about their own bodies and thus increase body dissatisfaction among men.\(^{25}\)

Their study found that men who were exposed to the sexist ads tended to rate themselves as thinner than the male ideal to a greater extent than those exposed to the nonsexist ads, as well as those not exposed to ads. They also found that men exposed to the sexist ads showed a greater discrepancy between their actual and ideal body size as well as a belief that others’ ideals for men’s bodies were larger than their own.\(^{26}\)

Advertisements and other forms of media find success in desire, particularly desire to be something we are not. Wolf’s beauty myth would not exist without the give-and-take between what media says is the ideal and our desire to match it. Wolf states that an economy based on slaves produces slaves. Those slaves are not only the women desiring to have larger busts and smaller waists, but also the men who have been raised to the comic book superhero ideal. The overly muscled superheroes are the ideal symbols of masculinity and strength. This hyper-masculine image results in the cultural belief that male equals hard and female equals soft, and to be anything other

\(^{25}\) Lavine, 1999, 1051

\(^{26}\) Lavine, 1999, 1056
than hard, armored, and emotionless is to be less than male. The images of our mythic narrative define women and men, their idealized form, and in the case of women, their sexualized form. Our culture often quotes “A picture is worth a thousand words” and in combining written word with visual narrative, comic books multiply their power of suggestion a thousand-fold.

Erving Goffman’s work *Gender Advertisement* highlights the distinct, even unconscious, messages delivered by an image’s composition. While this work is based on advertisements, the covers and pages of superhero comic books can be viewed similarly. Goffman claims that our ideals of gender are a result of ritualized displays established by our culture rather than by our biology; regardless of how “natural” these displays appear and feel. In fact, gender displays are often highly conceived and arise from an “inclination of individuals to portray a version of themselves and their relationships at strategic moments.”27 The vast majority of his work in *Gender Advertisements* explores the variety of body placements in advertisements that result not only in gender displays but also convey a sense of female inferiority and male superiority.

There is nothing unusual to the Western eye when viewing this cover of *Wonder Woman* (Fig 9). Standing side by side, Wonder Woman and Superman survey the scene before them with gravity and seriousness. What escapes the eye of many, on a

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27 Goffman, 1979, 3-7
conscious level, is the reinforcement of gender ideals within Western culture in this single image.

Figure 9: Cover image of Wonder Woman Vol 2 #88, Dead – Again. Cover Artist Brian Bolland. Published 6/1994 by DC Comics. [HTTP://DC.WIKIA.COM/WIKI/WONDER_WOMAN_VOL_2_88]

In the case of the above Wonder Woman cover, we can begin to dissect the art of comic books and their continued oppression of women through stereotyped displays of gender. With the assistance of Goffman’s work on gender advertisement we begin to see in this one single image, the subordination of Wonder Woman to her male superhero teammate Superman.
In *Gender Advertisement*, Goffman states that social weight, which is one’s rank and authority in social situations, is often portrayed by relative size, especially height. The “taller” individual is often seen as the authority figure in the scene. In the Wonder Woman cover, the authority of the scene is expressed by the taller of the two, Superman. What is curious, however, is the extreme difference in the height of the two characters. Wonder Woman is displayed as significantly shorter, and therefore weaker, than Superman in this image.

However, their height difference, as recorded by the Superhero Database, is only three inches. Given the heels of Wonder Woman’s famed red boots, the image on this particular cover should not illustrate any height difference, let alone such a significant difference. What would happen instead, if Wonder Woman and Superman were shown as the exact same height? Within our culture, a message of shared authority would be conveyed, leading to an understanding that both male and female hold equal share of social weight.

Continuing with Goffman’s work, we can explore the use of touch. Women, like Wonder Woman on this cover, are often shown delicately, or barely, touching objects or people. On the other hand, men, like Superman, are more often shown holding or grasping objects or people. In this particular image, we see what is called the “shoulder hold” that often indicates a restraint and control of the person being held. In fact, this

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28 Goffman, 1979, 28

29 Goffman, 1979, 29-31
one comic book cover manages to provide the reader with an example of almost every
one of the gender displays offered by Goffman, and it is not alone (Fig 10 – 13).

Time and time again, the male hero is shown in a powerful stance, muscles
bulging to indicate his superior strength, eyes keenly focused on the enemy at hand.
The male hero communicates a man’s ability to be in control at all times, to protect the
weak, and to consistently save the day regardless of the cost to self. It is unacceptable
for the male hero to doubt, to feel fear, to let another take control. Conversely, the
female hero repeatedly appears as nothing more than an accessory to the scene. The
female hero communicates the woman’s inability to handle a given situation on her
own, her need to be protected, and her importance as visual pleasure. There are
occasions, when a female appears powerful, such as Uncanny X-men #135 or Justice
League #157. However, in these particular instances, the female is either the villain or a
female hero gone crazy.
Figure 11: Cover Image of XFactor #117, Prelate Rising. Cover Art by John Dell. Published 12/1995 by Marvel Comics. [http://www.comicvine.com/x-factor-prelate-rising/37-65697/]
Figure 12: Cover Image from Supergirl #6, Trust Fund. Published 2/1997 by DC Comics. 
On at least four cover images, Wonder Woman straddles phallic symbols such as skyscrapers and missiles.

Figure 13: Cover Image of Wonder Woman Vol. 1 #12, Wonder Woman and the Winged Maidens of Venus. Cover Art by Harry G. Peters. Published Spring, 1945 by DC Comics. [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Wonder_Woman_Vol_1_12](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Wonder_Woman_Vol_1_12)

On the very first issue of Wonder Woman, Diana straddles a white horse. I truly hope I don’t have to explain that one, or the numerous covers in which Wonder Woman is tied up, or my favorite double sexual innuendo on Wonder Woman #205 (Fig. 14).
The “wrongness” of these gender displays can often only be perceived when they are switched as shown on the Gamma Squad’s website with the article “What if Male Superheroes’ Costumes were Designed Like Female Superheroes’ Costumes?” (Fig 15), which highlights a particularly fun rendering of Superman and Kevin Bolk’s alternate Avenger’s promotional poster (Fig. 16). Seeing these images, I can only wonder if
commenter David now understands the difference between being a sexual individual and being sexualized.

Figure 12: Image From Munden’s Bar by Martha Thomass, Valerie D’Orazio, Norm Breyfogle, Bob Pinaha, and Matt Webb via Comic Book Resources. 
It is possible to create an inspirational cover of a female superhero who is shown to be as strong as her male counterparts and not an object to ogle. One such cover can be found on Wonder Woman Volume 3 #25 (Fig. 17). On this cover, Wonder Woman is proudly displaying her muscles, one of the few times that female superheroes are placed in a stereotypically male pose. Even better, two young girls stand before the post of Wonder Woman, emulating that exact pose.
The depiction of the white child as emulator rather than the African-American child, as well as the African American child’s reaction, should be explored in future works, particularly those devoted to race and comic books. To me, this image is a reflection of myself in the backyard with my Wonder Woman swimsuit and my red goulashes; girls desperate for a strong woman capable of saving the world all on her own, a woman who is so much more than the man in her life, and so much more than a sexual object. A Wonder Woman, or any female superhero, portrayed as a strong woman capable of saving the world on her own.
Chapter 5: Does Superpower Equal Empowerment?

A hero who is so much more than the man in her life, and so much more than a sexual object, should not be that difficult to find. The superhero comic book world is populated with individuals who possess super speed and strength, the abilities to fly and teleport, and the capacity to move objects with their minds and render themselves invisible. The super-powered individuals who populate these worlds are both male and female. Female heroes who fight against Gods and cosmic forces should inspire women and allow us to believe empowerment\(^1\) is possible. Because shouldn’t superpowers equal empowerment?

Porn comic book writer and artist Jess Fink states,

A lot of writers don’t seem to be able to write female characters unless there is a need for them to be female. What I mean is that women are treated like cake icing, something to make the story sweeter, sexier, to give the reader something nice to look at amid all the violence. It feels like if you asked one of them to write a female character who wasn't overtly sexual, like they do with males all the

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\(^1\) In this paper, empowerment is related to the model of power labeled “power with” which is defined as “self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how can individuals can recognise through analysing their experience how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this.”
time, they'd look at you like you had two heads and say, ‘Well then, what's the point of the character being female?’ ²

Super-powered females function in a world dominated by patriarchy, disempowered and exploited. If we can get past their visual representations, their actual character development still bends to the benefit of men.

Big Barda is almost always mentioned when the discussion of strong female characters occurs. In fact, Big Barda’s image is displayed on BackIssue magazine No. 54, an issue entitled “Liberated Ladies.”³ Big Barda was a warrior from the planet Apokolips, raised to be a supreme fighter and leader of the Female Furies, a group of elite warriors. Of course, she is also able to fight in a full metal suit or a red metal bikini that does not fully contain her breasts.

Big Barda begins as a substantial character, a representation of her creator’s wife in comic book form. However, when her creator, Jack Kirby, no longer penned her stories, she quickly faded away into the background of her superhero husband. Resigned to suburbia, Big Barda’s life comes to an end on her kitchen floor.

Was Big Barda liberated and empowered? When the subtitle of the article reads “She’s hot, she’s sexy and she’s liberated”, I tend to answer no. The first mention of Big Barda is her looks not her abilities. It is difficult to be empowered when you are an object. Perhaps we need to keep looking for empowered female hero.

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² Hudson, 10/13/2011
³ Kingman, 2012
The comic book universe of the X-Men presents a world populated with human beings blessed, or cursed, with superhuman powers originating from genetic mutations. The X-Men are a select group of mutants, gathered around Professor Charles Xavier, who battle to maintain that mutants shall not dominate through the gift of their powers. These X-Men do not consider themselves greater than non-mutated humans, and often struggle to assimilate into the “normal” world. Other mutants, often led by a mutant named Magneto, consider themselves *homo superior* and seek to dominate humankind. The conflict between these two groups informs the storylines found within the X-Men comics.

The X-Men team is home to several female mutants, all powerful and productive members of their respective teams. The powers of these women, in many cases unmatched by most of the male characters, include telepathy, telekinesis, the ability to shape-change, and the ability to absorb the powers and memories of other human beings. Do the powers of these women lead to empowerment? Or does this comic book universe repress the feminine divine through the characters’ own superhuman powers?

As a young teenager, Anna Marie, later known as Rogue, kisses her childhood friend Cody Robbins. In that one innocent moment, Anna Marie finds her world shattered as her mind is bombarded with Cody’s memories and Cody slips into a permanent coma. Anna Marie is a mutant, with the ability to absorb the memories of others, as well as their mutant powers. Over time her mutant ability grants her flight, super strength, and a virtually indestructible body.
The longer Rogue holds contact with her “victim,” the more permanent the effects of her mutant ability. Upon joining her foster mother’s team of mutants, Rogue comes into contact with Ms. Marvel. This contact leaves Ms. Marvel in a coma, and infuses Rogue with the powers of super strength and flight. The incident leaves Rogue devastated, and she turns to Professor Xavier for help in learning to control her powers.

We could, of course, stray here on a discussion of how her female mentor leads her down an immoral path that leads to the comatose state of another human. We could also discuss how she is ultimately saved by a male authority figure, but let’s focus on her powers. Her powers operate as a chastity belt representing fear of female sexuality and power.

There is a “long-standing Indo-European mythological tradition in which female sexual energies drain men of their sexual energy and therefore, according to the logic of myth, kill off the male name and line.” Rogue’s abilities can easily be seen as an allegory to this tradition, and like Medusa’s ability to turn a man to stone with her gaze, Rogue can drain a man of his power with a simple touch. Like Medusa, Rogue contains the juxtaposition of extraordinary beauty and horror. When Rogue first appeared in the X-Men comics, her adult appearance was androgynous, but overtime her breasts have grown substantially, her hair has begun to flow in feminine waves, and she matches perfectly the feminine ideal of the curvaceously thin woman. Yet, while she is a sexually

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attractive, hyper-sexualized character, her very sexuality is rejected, emphasizing the dichotomy of the virgin/whore role to which women are relegated.

As virgin, Rogue remains a hero, using her powers to help the X-Men overcome evil and continuously save humanity. She is a charming Southern belle with a stubborn but loveable streak who wins the hearts of her entire team. In her virginal state, untouched and untouched, Rogue possesses all the qualities of a “good woman.”

Should Rogue move beyond the confines of the virgin, she now represents all that is feared of a fully realized and integrated woman. She becomes for the male, all that “mystifies, seduces, and destroys.”\(^5\) In the journey of the female hero, Pearson and Pope emphasize the importance of the hero’s first sexual encounter as a means to a new positive relationship with her body and a loss of control of self. Ultimately, the hero’s journey cannot be complete, her true transformation and search of independence from her cultural captors, cannot be complete without this encounter. Without this encounter she is left dependent and defined by the male.\(^6\)

If the power of touch, a power often labeled as feminine, does not lead to empowerment, perhaps a more masculine characteristic residing in the mind may bring forth empowerment. Such a power could be found in a mutant with telepathic and telekinetic powers. First known as Marvel Girl, Jean Grey is a mutant with tremendous psychic skills. Jean’s natural powers include the ability to read minds, project her

\(^5\) Bowers, 1990, 225

\(^6\) Pearson & Pope, 1981, 154-155
thoughts into others, move objects with her mind through telekinesis, and travel in the astral realm. Jean’s encounter with a cosmic force upon her death led to her bodily resurrection, as well as an amplification of her powers to near infinite levels. When merged with this Phoenix force, Jean possessed the power to destroy worlds. Comic book experts can argue that this was not truly Jean Grey, but the Phoenix force in the guise of Jean, but from a larger perspective of the character of Jean Grey, it is difficult to separate the mythology of one from the other.

This extended storyline has become known as “The Dark Phoenix Saga.” Much like the Fantastic Four, the X-men are exposed to deadly radiation during a mission in space. During this exposure, Jean reaches her full potential as a psychic and becomes pure thought. She is able to reassemble a body and rejoins her X-Men team, now calling herself “Phoenix.”

As Phoenix, Jean repairs the broken M’Kraan Crystal, thereby, saving the entire universe, and discovering the limitlessness of her power. Phoenix voluntarily suppresses and contains her powers and life appears to go back to normal. However, such power attracts the attention of villains who hope to bend it to their will, and Phoenix soon finds herself pawn in the mind games of the mutant illusionist Mastermind as he attempts to overtake the Inner Circle of the Hellfire Club.

Mastermind overcomes the superior psychic capacities of Phoenix (insert sarcastic tone here) and convinces her that she is reliving the memories of Lady Grey, an

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7 The Dark Phoenix Saga consists of *The X-Men* #129 through #138, published in 1980.
ancestor of Jean Grey. In this illusion, Lady Grey is head-over-heels in love with Jason Wyngarde, played by Mastermind, and is the Black Queen of the Hellfire Club. Through the illusion, Phoenix becomes nothing more than a weapon for the Hellfire Club and is commanded to capture the X-Men.

During the battle, Phoenix’s true lover, Cyclops, is defeated by Mastermind in a psychic duel, breaking the hold Mastermind has over Phoenix. In discovering what she has done to her beloved team, Phoenix renames herself “Dark Phoenix,” defeats the Hellfire Club, and leaves the galaxy. Her travel leaves her hungry and she consumes an star to quench that hunger, thereby committing genocide with the death of billions who live within the star’s solar system. The saga continues, ultimately ending with Jean’s suicide, and the pronouncement that “Jean Grey could have lived to become a god. But it was more important to her that she die...a human.”

It was hoped that Jean could be resurrected by the story’s creators, but Marvel’s Editor-in-Chief, Jim Shooter, objected to the resurrection of a character that committed genocide. In order to bring back Jean, she must not have committed genocide, and a storyline was hatched that separated Jean from the Phoenix and created a clone, Madelyne Pryor.

Regardless of who actually committed genocide, the story is deeply connected to Jean and her powers of telepathy. As I read the Dark Phoenix saga, I wondered how a psychic of limitless and god-like powers could be so easily manipulated by another, less powerful, mutant. The manipulation was focused on her love of a man, Jason
Wyngaarde, and once again in true pop culture form, the storyline of a powerful woman is reduced to her love life.\(^8\)

In 2006, the Dark Phoenix saga was for the movie *X-Men: The Last Stand*. In the second film of the series, *X-men: Evolution*, Jean attempts to save her fellow mutants during the destruction of a dam, which overwhelms their aircraft. As savior, she sacrifices herself and at the end of the film we believe she is dead. However, as *X-Men: The Last Stand* begins, Cyclops visits the site of Jean’s death and is surprised by Jean’s sudden appearance. Scott disappears and we can only assume that Jean has killed him, as all that is found of him is his special ruby quartz glasses.

As with the comic book storyline, Jean is manipulated by an enemy, this time Magneto. He uses her extreme telepathic and telekinetic powers in his pursuit to rid the world of non-mutant humans. In the ensuing battle between the X-Men and Magneto, Magneto loses his mutant powers and Jean attempts to destroy everything around her. With self-healing powers, Wolverine, another love interest of Jean’s, approaches Jean. Jean begs Wolverine to save her. Wolverine stabs Jean with his retractable adamantium claws, the battle is won, and once again a woman with god-like powers is saved by a man.

Being saved by and focused on men, is not exclusive to the female team members of the X-Men. In fact, it is a common occurrence for most of Marvel’s teams,

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\(^8\) Movies are often held up to the Bechdel Test, in which a film must (1) have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man. While, this test does not specifically apply to the Dark Phoenix Saga, it illustrates how often female characters center around male characters, even if the women characters are billed as the stars of the film.
including its very first. Susan “Sue” Storm Richards, Marvel’s first super-powered female
color character, blasts off into space and comes home with the ability to turn invisible. Each
of the Fantastic Four characters possesses powers that are amplifications of their innate
color character. In the case of Sue, the creators decided she should be shy and timid, hence
the power of invisibility. To make matters worse for this female character, Sue originally
was so physically taxed by the use of her powers that she was known to faint after a
good battle. No straddling the downed enemy for Sue, she was lying right next to them.
In addition to her fainting spells, Sue is also shown designing uniforms, serving cookies,
and typing up reports for Reed. Yes, like Wonder Woman of old, the woman on the
team was of course the secretary.

Readers responded to what they saw as Sue’s lack of contribution and requested
her removal from the team. In issue 11, entitled “A Visit with the Fantastic Four” Sue
expresses her concern regarding the reader letters and Ben and Reed quickly vouch that
she is an important member of the team, with Ben finally stating, “If you readers wanna
see women fightin’ all the time, then go see lady wrestlers!” Of course, this is stated
just before he redirects everyone to the birthday party Sue has planned.9 Obviously,
Marvel did not understand what readers meant by a contributing member of the team.

However, Sue’s long history and the evolution of her character cannot be
discounted. Eventually Reed and Sue wed and have a child, making the title Invisible
Girl a bit inappropriate. Finally, Marvel has a female character that moves beyond the

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9 For discussion on the history of female superheroes, particularly from a feminist standpoint, see Wonder
pop princess teenager and graduates to the title of woman. Along with motherhood, Sue also developed a more assertive edge and as Invisible Woman she is now able to project offensive force fields, leaving her one of the most powerful of the members of the team, and second in command. Yes, second, not first.

Scarlett Witch of the Avengers was once first in command. Scarlett Witch is a mutant and witch, able to manipulate probability, and married to an android. In 1999, Nominated by her teammates, Scarlet Witch becomes deputy leader during Captain America’s prolonged absence. Her gender is never an issue during her time as leader, but when Captain America returns she steps down and appoints herself “Morale Officer.” More recently, Scarlett Witch uses her powers of probability to depower 90% of the mutant population in act of vengeance against her father Magneto.

It seems that the possibility of empowered super-powered female heroes is at our fingertips. They take on leadership roles, but still demur to at least one male. They gain the powers of Goddesses, but they in turn go insane, destroy entire solar systems, or strip others of their powers. As the creators seemingly grant the female characters liberation and empowerment, they take a quick turn and the characters find themselves sliding back into the abyss of objectification, second billing, and death.

Recently, DC Comics came under fire by a much outspoken female comic book geek in a batgirl costume, for their unequal treatment of women and their lack of female comic book creators. At the time, the New 52 launch hosted 160 credited
creators, only three of whom were female.\textsuperscript{10} DC stated during the above mentioned firestorm that they would be happy to hire more women to work on their superhero titles; there just wasn’t anyone out there to hire. Perhaps DC can now pick up a copy of \textit{Womanthology} and find a few artists and writers.

Axel Alonso, Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, told Comic Book Resources on March 23, 2012 “We love our female superheroes. There are many titles – \textit{The Fearless}, for instance, where female characters play a huge role even if their name isn’t the logo of the book. And we have plenty more plans for 2012. Captain Marvel will not be lonely.”\textsuperscript{11} An article on Digital Spy two days later ran the headline “Marvel Comics’ Axel Alonso promises more female-led titles.”\textsuperscript{12} While the addition of a title featuring Carol Danvers does technically count as more female-led titles, the article’s title seems a bit inflated giving that one in a sea of titles is still just one. The new Captain Marvel is our token title as Gail Simone is our token female creator.

While Marvel may be adding a female-led book to appease the audience, \textit{BackIssue} magazine devotes an entire edition to “liberated ladies.” The editor opens the issue with a description of the women in his life, from his mother who appeared to sacrifice everything for everyone, but never defined herself as liberated, to his aunt who was big and boisterous, and therefore, liberated.\textsuperscript{13} Big and boisterous ladies, women

\textsuperscript{10} Hanley, 2011

\textsuperscript{11} Alonso, 3/23/2012

\textsuperscript{12} Armitage, 2012

\textsuperscript{13} Eury, 2/2012, 2
with strong personalities as well as strong arms, are presented to us by the mythic narrative as liberated and empowered.

When we are given entire magazine issues with examples of the “liberated” female superhero and a list of existing female artists and writers, the battle to eliminate oppression and sexual objectification seems unnecessary and fanatical. Margaret Finnegan stated,

At least you know what you’re fighting against when you’re pitted head to head with June Cleaver. The commercial embrace of kick-butt girls breeds a less obvious threat to women's struggle for equality: the illusion of equality. Feminism has few greater enemies. It breeds complacency. Worse yet, it implies that feminism is obsolete. Who needs it? Girls today can do anything. They can be anything. I've seen it on TV so it must be true.14

14 Finnegan, 1/1/2001
Chapter 6: Alternative Mythic Narratives

When the discussion of women in comic books arises, responses and commentary generally gravitate toward the superhero genre. Yet, the world of comic books, once dominated by westerns, horror, and romance, is once again rich with a host of other genres.

Mainstream comics are the comics we most often think of - full color, slick paged books featuring superheroes in fantastical stories. These mainstream comics are produced primarily by Marvel and DC and dominate the shelves of local comic book shops. The characters and storylines are corporately owned, and DC and Marvel have both found that by moving beyond the sales of the comic books, their respective companies have gained billions of dollars. Putting Superman’s face on the big screen, small screen, lunch boxes, backpacks, and amusement park rides has provided enough profit to sustain several small countries. Just think, DC purchased the rights to Superman for just $100.

Mainstream comics tend to involve storylines that are selling. In fact, DC comics broadened its base with a series for mature readers under the header of Vertigo Comics when alternative comics began to find a significant reader base. Alternative comics, while varied and hard to define, tend to attract adult readers with more realistic storylines and characters. Often the writer and artist are one and the same and the book and its characters are owned by its creator.
Alternative comics are often self-published, creating financial obstacles not experienced by the mainstream publishers. Getting an alternative comic book on the shelves of comic book stores can be a challenge, limiting the possible fan base growth necessary to sustain such a project. In addition, nearly half of alternative comic book readers are women, individuals that often do not often feel comfortable entering comic book stores.

This fact that a substantial alternative comic book readership is female generates some fairly heated responses when the question of women in comic books arises. Many women are simply tired of the constant debate, citing that women do exist in the world of comic books, if we broaden our views of what constitutes comic books. Yet, these same women go on to say that women do not enjoy superhero comics as if women shouldn’t enjoy this genre.

I enjoy superhero comic books. The female contributors of Girls-Gone-Geek.com enjoy superhero comics. So does the author of DC Women Kicking Ass and Kelly Thompson of She Has No Head! at Comic Book Resource. The Tumblr blog Superheroes are for Girls, too! provides ample visual evidence of the love girls and women can have for superhero comics.

The men and women who argue that superhero comic books are for men and alternative comics are for women not only demean female superhero geeks but distract from the issue at hand. If we continue this argument, the only ones profiting are the producers of mainstream comics, who can continue to create Gods with twelve pack abs
Mainstream comic book publishers do not care what women want. They don’t really care what men want either. They care about what sells comic books. The message provided by the publishers is that sex sells and female super heroes do not sell if they are not objects of male heterosexual fantasy first and heroes second.

Yet the recent release of *The Hunger Games* stands in opposition to the current mythic narrative. The movie, based on a young adult book trilogy, opened with $155 million in box office sales, making it the second most profitable opening weekend for a film not a sequel.¹ With a fully dressed female lead, who stays that way throughout the film, *The Hunger Games* proves that more than sex is capable of selling a female-led movie. More importantly, the gender of the character is nearly irrelevant to the storyline. What makes the main character, Katniss Everdeen, so inspirational is her ability to cross gender lines. When her father dies, she becomes the bread winner.

When her mother emotionally abandons the family, Katniss takes on the role of care-giver to her little sister, Prim. Katniss is a character that is universally inspirational. When a character’s gender is not her identifying feature, her gender becomes a non-issue for the audience, and both males and females can find inspiration in the story and the character. If a movie and book can create such a character, why not a comic book?

Womanthology: Heroic, an anthology graphic novel, was created entirely by women to showcase the talents of women in the comic book industry. The project was created by more than 168 contributors and took only 19 hours to reach its funding target. It is the best-funded comics project featured on Kickstarter to date and is the 25th most funded Kickstarter project in history.2

The stories in Womanthology: Heroic provides readers with normal, average individuals in heroic acts, as well as female superheroes. From its opening comic, Womanthology redefines heroic and the female hero, giving us heroes that never forget the importance of a small act, as well as a female superhero afraid to be super because she does not fit the mythic narrative provided by our culture.

In addition to this anthology, the documentary Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines, created by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan and Kelcey Edwards, successfully reached its funding goal on Kickstarter and is now being screened across the United States. The film examines the evolution and legacy of Wonder Woman and the representations of powerful women in society. The film includes interviews with Gloria Steinem, Shelby Knox, Lynda Carter, Lindsay Wagner, and Kathleen Hanna. “Wonder Women! Introduces audiences to a cast of fictional and real life super heroines fighting for positive role models for girls, both on screen and off, and reminds us of our common human need for stories that tell us we can all be heroes.”3

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2 De Liz, 2012, 11
3 From the film’s synopsis as published at http://wonderwomendoc.com/film/
The success of these small projects is due in large part to the internet and social media. Without Kickstarter, Twitter, fan blogs, and Facebook, funding a female-centered graphic novel anthology in 19 hours would be impossible. Funding it at all, likely would have taken years.

Comics Alliance hosted a discussion with Editor-in-Chief Laura Hudson, Blair Butler, host of G4’s Fresh Ink, Heidi MacDonald, editor of The Beat, and Jill Pantozzi, contributor to Newsrama and Publisher’s Weekly. Among these women there was a consensus that women have always liked geek culture and the internet has made it possible for women to see all the other women who like it, giving them more confidence to speak out against issues such as sexism in comics.⁴ Discussing comics with others required readers to visit comic book stores, environments often intimidating to women. Now women can host their own blogs, jump into online forum conversations, and publish their own comics on the web.⁵

The successes of projects like Womanthology and Wonder Women! is also due to the loyalty of readers, both male and female. The growing understanding of the effects of hegemonic masculinity on boys and men contributes to the support of men in creating healthy alternatives to our current mythic narrative of the female superhero. The gender-role narratives that inform our culture, not only define the feminine and feminine roles, but place specific defining characteristics on masculinity, such as driven,

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⁴ Hudson, 5/20/2011

⁵ Faith Erin Hicks publishes The Adventures of Superhero Girl at http://superherogirladventures.blogspot.com/
ambitious, rational, stoic, and heterosexual. This mythic narrative creates a culture in which young boys fear the words “you cry like a girl” or “you throw like a girl.” Boys and men who show an interest in their attire are called “fags” and must enjoy sports if they don’t wish to be labeled “gay.” As men begin to rally against the limiting and negative effects of the mythic narrative on their selfhood, they lend credibility to the efforts of women seeking to rally against the same mythic narrative.

Western culture is structured on a one-and-only-one right answer. There is one and only one God. Science provides the only correct definition of truth. There is one and only one ideal male and female form. This hegemony creates a mythic narrative that leaves us all, male or female, white or black, Christian or Hindu, lacking and creates a culture in which we as a people always desire something we are not. A desire to be what we are not produces consumers always looking for the next product to transform them from their sorry and unattractive selves to the ideal man or woman of the comic book pages, magazine covers, and movie trailers.

What we need as women, as men, as Latina, as Vietnamese, as poor, as rich, as differently-abled, as gay, as straight, and all the other varieties of humanity is different. Yet the mythic narrative tells us we need 6’8” unemotional, never-afraid, freight trains for Gods and 5’10” large busted, broken-backed, always second in command Goddesses (Fig 18 & 19) rather than strong and various persons in whom we can relate and see our own possible greatness (Fig 20 & 21).
FIGURE 158: JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA. ARTIST UNKNOWN

FIGURE 19: WOMEN OF X-MEN. ARTIST UNKNOWN
FIGURE 160: FROM PHOTO SHOOT TITLED "THE ATHLETE" BY HOWARD SCHARTZ AND BEVERLY ORNSTEIN

FIGURE 21: FROM PHOTO SHOOT TITLED "THE ATHLETE" BY HOWARD SCHARTZ AND BEVERLY ORNSTEIN
Chapter 7: Creating Our Own Goddess

Morrison concludes *Supergods* by quoting Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Pico sets forth the idea that we as humans have the ability to choose what we are to be, whether to live a brutish life or one that is divine. As Morrison suggests, we can transform the words of Pico to reflect our modern culture and in doing so we transform the words to - *Superman burns with the fire of charity; Oracle flashes forth the splendor of intelligence; the Batman stands firm with the firmness of justice.*

The power of mythic narrative is the power of transformation and the power to shape the world in the ways we hope to see it and live it. *Womanthology* and Katniss Everdeen provide us with new and varied Goddesses from which to choose. Their success illustrates the need and desire for new mythic narratives, mythic narratives that do not follow an androcentric view of mythology and do not reinforce the woman as object mindset established by patriarchal systems. “We can write new lives and new futures, and, more important, live them. Stories can break hearts or formant revolutions. Words can put electricity into our hearts or make our blood run cold.”

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1 The original words from the *Oration* are “The Seraphim burns with the fire of charity; from the Cherubim flashes forth the splendor of intelligence; the Thrones stand firm with the firmness of justice.”

2 Morrison, 2011, 415
Facts and data hold little value against mythology. The story of the matriarchal Mother Goddess of spiritualist feminists illustrates this very point. This myth resonates with the feminist movements because, unlike facts and data, the myth weaves a pattern of relationship, provides meaning and structure, and sets a course for the future.

Morrison finishes his book by allowing us to glimpse the power that superheroes have had in his life. He tells us, “We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us”\(^3\) and reflects on the countless positive affects Superman and his brethren have played in his life. As I read Morrison’s ode to the superhero, I cannot help but think back on that four year-old girl in the red golashes, the young woman working in the comic book shop, or the moment I walked into the toy aisle and discovered Scarlett Witch was not included in the *Avengers* action figure collection.

My heroes, my Goddesses, were visually rooted in suppression, identifying beauty as unattainable and foremost in the defining principals of the ideal woman. Their appearances exaggerate the thin but big-busted ideal that has positively correlated with an increase in anorexia, bulimia, self-objectification, and body dissatisfaction. Their costuming and posturing display the female body as sexual object, not vehicles of strength and courage. The powers of the Goddesses often enslave them or drive them to insanity, illustrating the patriarchal fear of a female with power.

The power of the mythic narrative for girls and women is not nearly as positive as it was for Morrison. Nearly a century ago, two teenage boys created a mythic

\(^3\) Morrison, 2011, 416
narrative of the man of steel. His story shaped generations, defining heroism, loyalty, compassion, and courage. If two teenage boys can create the beginnings of such a powerful myth, if the feminist movement can create a myth to build hope for the sacredness of the feminine, then there is nothing stopping us from transforming and creating our own Goddesses in capes. The fight will not be easy, but we will have the heroes of our own creation by our sides.
References and Further Readings


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