# Gender and the American Superhero

**General Trends in 1930s-1960s**

- Most major superheroes have been male

- A few women superheroes:
    - DC (Wonder Woman, Supergirl, Hawkgirl, Cat Woman, etc.)
    - Marvel (Invisible Girl, Wasp, Black Widow, Marvel Girl, etc.)

- But most women were:
    - subordinate
    - ancillary
    - token
    - fulfilled stereotypes
        - damsel in distress / weak
        - secretary
        - girlfriend
        - 'wench'
        - sexualized

- A few exceptions:
- Marvel introduced the first female superheroes in early 1970s, written by women writers
- in 1972, debuted *The Claws of the Cat* by Linda Fite
- time of Second Wave Feminism
  - 'women's liberation movement'

- Greer Nelson
- inversion of Batman story but with empowerment
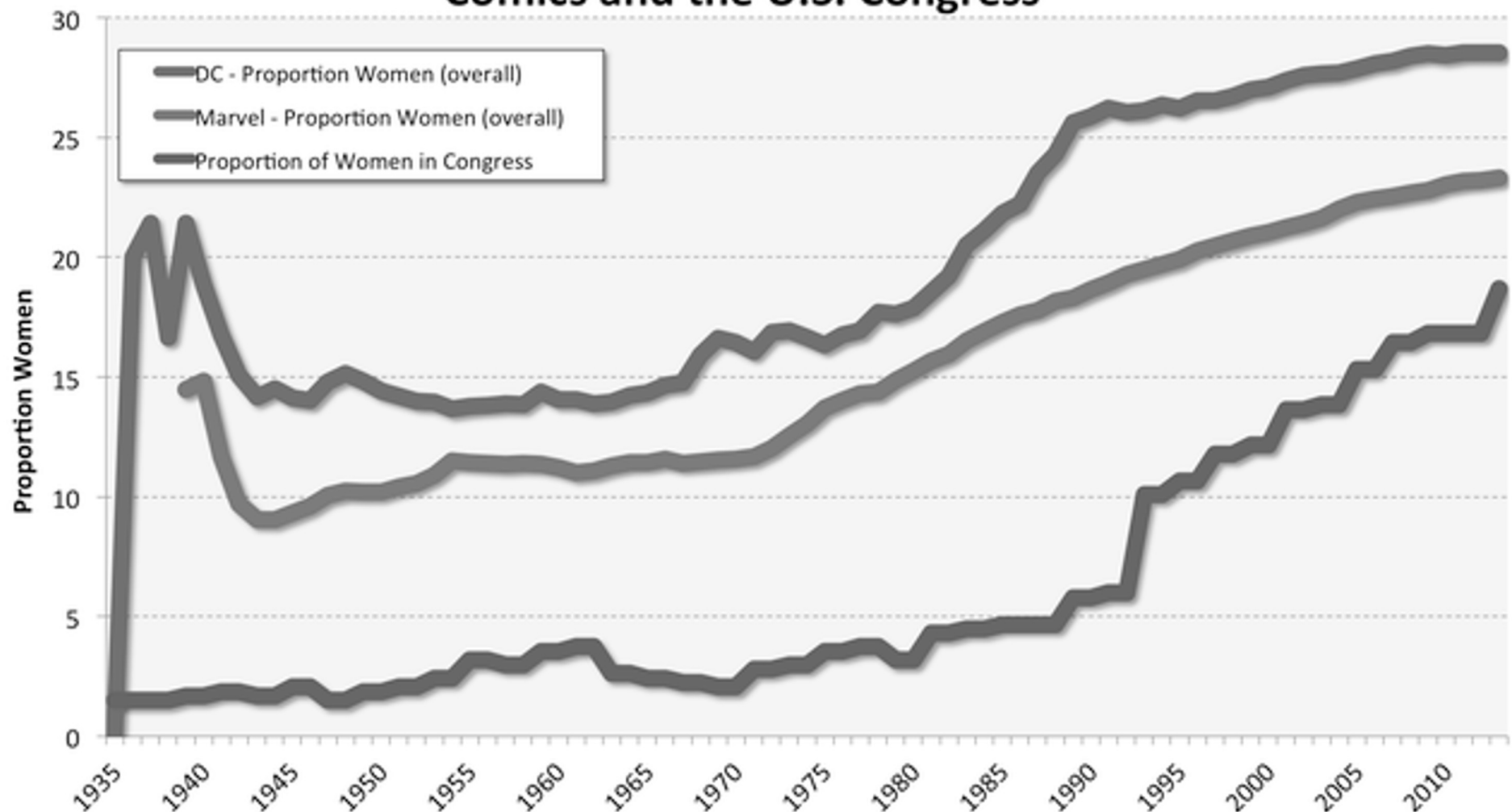
## X-Men in 1980s onwards

- Chris Clarement / John Byrne

- Strong female characters

- stories not about what they were thinking about men

- Entire storylines with men in subordinate roles

- Marvel Girl / Jean Grey / Phoenix

- Storm

- Rogue

- Shadowcat

- Jubilee

- Dazzler

- Emma Frost

- Reversal in 1990s!
  - <u>hypersexualization of women superheroes</u>
- Article by Behm-Morawitz and Pennell
- QUESTION: "In the article by Behm-Morawitz and Pennell, they talk about the notion of 'hypergendering.' Explain what this term means. Then give some examples from contemporary superhero movies to illustrate their point.
- Male characters -> hypermasculine
- Female characters -> hyperfeminine/hyper-sexualized
- how do women superheroes subvert and reinforce stereotypes at the same time?
  - fundamental contradiction
    - p. 83
- issue of identification and "superbodies"?
  - a problem?
  - impossible standards of beauty
- possible ways to depict empowered women superheroes?
    - examples from comics & movies?
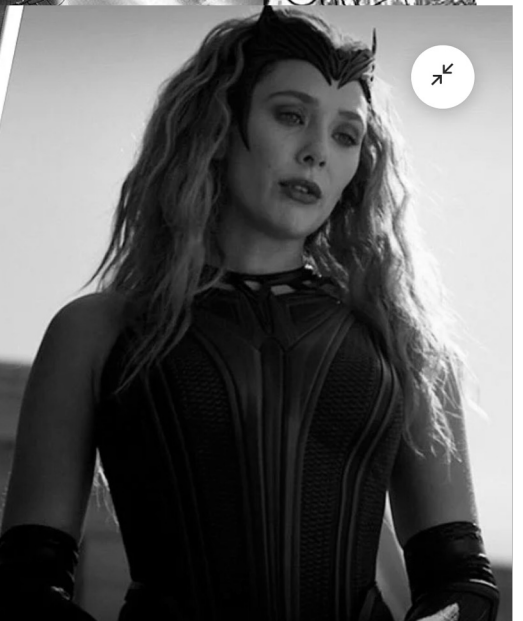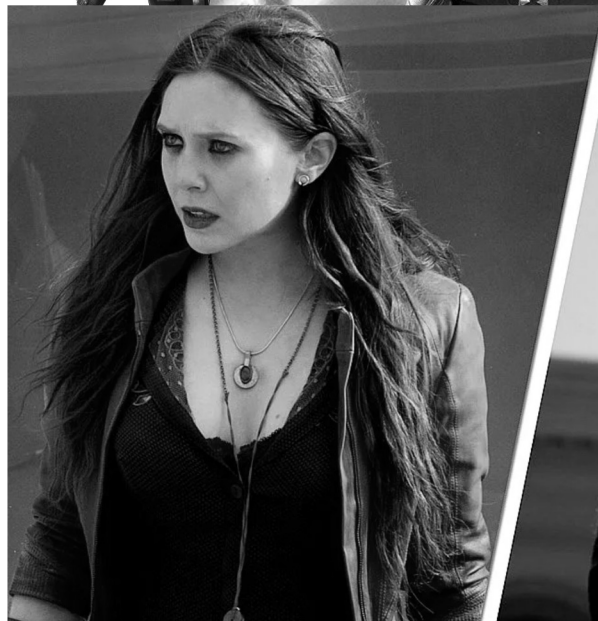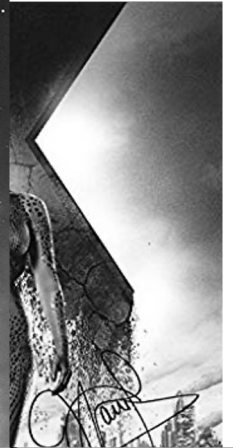
**Proportion of Women Characters in the DC and Marvel Comics and the U.S. Congress**

Legend:
- DC - Proportion Women (overall)
- Marvel - Proportion Women (overall)
- Proportion of Women in Congress

Y-axis: Proportion Women (0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30)

X-axis: 1935, 1940, 1945, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010

Source 1: Comic book data were compiled by Walt Hickey at FiveThirtyEight.com using DC and Marvel Wikia sites (accessed via Github). Comic book data only illustrate a single continuity from each publisher (Earth-616 in Marvel and New Earth in DC).

Source 2: Data for proportion of Congress comprised by women from a "Fact Sheet" from Rutgers' Center for American Women in Politics

- Study from 2017 on all superheroes
  - Amanda Shendruk
- 26.7% of all Marvel/DC characters are female
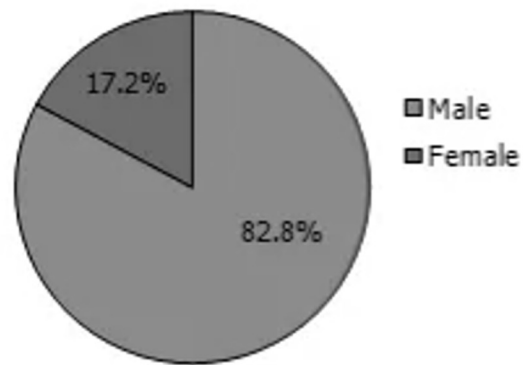- 12% of mainstream superhero comics have female protagonists



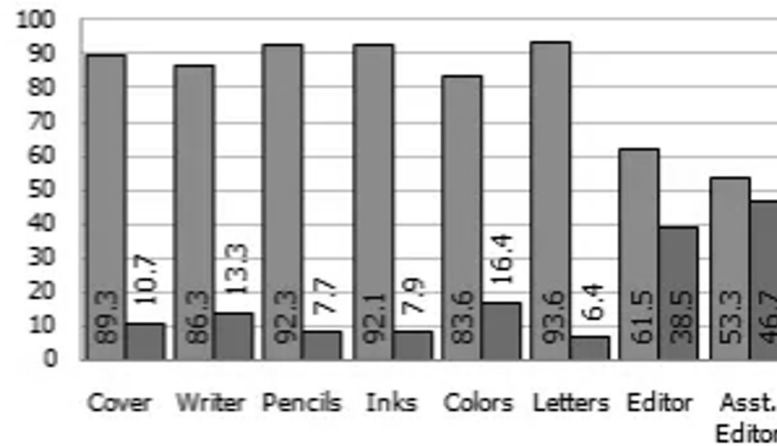*Mystery in Space* No. 8 (June/July 1952)

- Study from 2016 on Marvel superheroes
    - Katherine J. Murphy
- Changes from 1960 (Silver Age) to c. 2014
    - 1960-1969 – 12.2%
    - 2010-2014 – 22.5%
- Bechdel Test
- Readership
    - 1995 survey – 13.41% of comic book readership was female
        - average age for women - 25 to 35
        - average age for men – 16 to 24
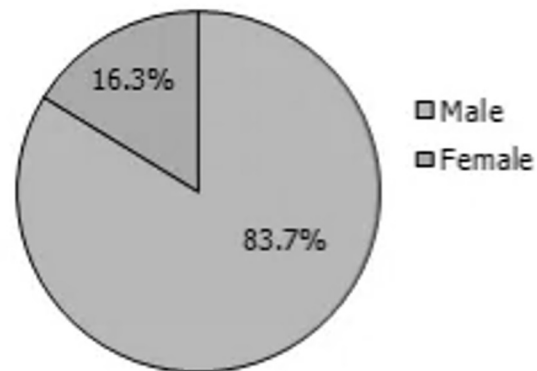    - 2014 – 46.67% of comic book readership was female

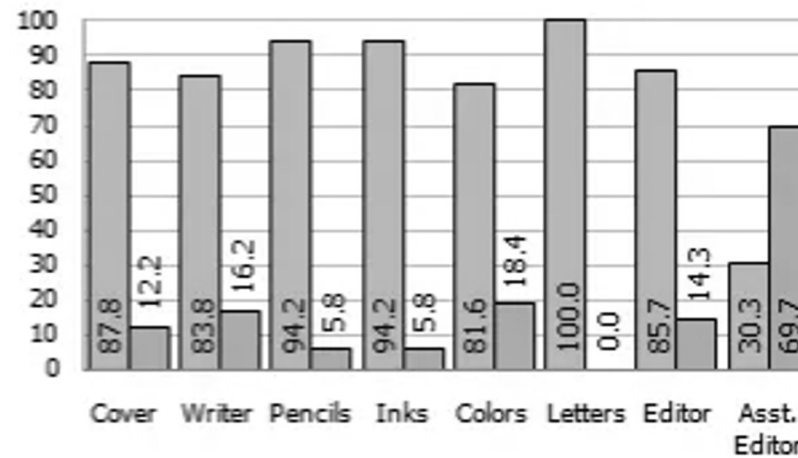## Credits in DC Comic Books Total, Percentage - Jul-Dec 2018



17.2%

82.8%

■ Male
■ Female

## Credits in DC Comic Books By Profession, Percentage - Jul-Dec 2018



| | Cover | Writer | Pencils | Inks | Colors | Letters | Editor | Asst. Editor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 89.3 | 86.3 | 92.3 | 92.1 | 83.6 | 93.6 | 61.5 | 53.3 |
| Female | 10.7 | 13.3 | 7.7 | 7.9 | 16.4 | 6.4 | 38.5 | 46.7 |

## Credits in Marvel Comic Books Total, Percentage - Jul-Dec 2018



16.3%

83.7%

■ Male
■ Female

## Credits in Marvel Comics By Profession, Percentage - Jul-Dec 2018



| | Cover | Writer | Pencils | Inks | Colors | Letters | Editor | Asst. Editor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 87.8 | 83.8 | 94.2 | 94.2 | 81.6 | 100.0 | 85.7 | 30.3 |
| Female | 12.2 | 16.2 | 5.8 | 5.8 | 18.4 | 0.0 | 14.3 | 69.7 |

**Source**: "Women in Comics, By the Numbers: Summer and Fall 2018," February 15, 2018

- Ms. Marvel

- CONVOLUTED HISTORY

- character named Captain Marvel introduced in 1939 by Fawcett Comics
  - popular in 1940s, but went bankrupt in 1953
    - DC comics sued Fawcett: said Captain Marvel was too close to Superman
    - Captain Marvel canceled
    - DC comics bought rights and relaunched as Shazam in 1970s but couldn't use 'Captain Marvel' name
    - by that time, Marvel Comics took over 'Captain Marvel' name

- Marvel Comics introduced new Captain Marvel in 1967
  - created by Stan Lee and Roy Thomas
  - basically alien (Mar-Vell) from Kree race who changed places with a kid named Rick Jones
  - very cosmic storylines
  - "died" in 1982

- Character named Carol Danvers had been introduced in 1968 in *Captain Marvel* comic

- in 1977, she became "Ms. Marvel"
  - DNA fused with Captain Marvel, i.e., half-Kree
  - was an Avenger

- in 2012, Carol Danvers assumed mantle of old Captain Marvel

- in the meantime, other characters assumed title of "Ms. Marvel," including:
  - Kamala Khan in 2013



*Whiz Comics* # 22 (October 1941)



*Captain Marvel* # 29 (November 1973)



*Ms. Marvel* # 1 (January 1977)

- Questions on *Ms. Marvel*
  - 16-year old Pakistani-American Muslim girl
  - not 1st Muslim superhero
    - Dust
  - written by G. Willow Wilson
  - setting?
  - plot?
  - themes?
    - immigrant
    - working class family
    - community
    - teenage angst
    - not popular
    - fandom

- Questions
  - Often in popular culture, content creators and writers seek to introduce "diversity" into their work. This can end up being a form of "tokenism"; or a way to show how "other" communities are "different" and "exotic" (a kind of Orientalism); or a way to show that "other" communities struggle with problems relatable across gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc -- that they are "just like us" (where "us" is considered white male heteronormativity). In reading this first issue of *Ms. Marvel*, how do you think the author G. Willow Wilson tackled this challenge? Is this tokenism? Is this about being different? About being same?
  - What is the principal theme of 'difference' here: Is it about being a Muslim? About being a teenage girl (as opposed to a boy)? About class (think of her family's status and where she lives)? About being a kind of plain superhero? What makes her position unique? Or not? Support your answer with two different examples from the story.
  - "intersectionality"