"itch-ray projector," with illustrations that might be taken directly from Nazi magazines like Streicher's *Stuermer*. One particularly popular comic book features the story of "Mother Mandelbaum, A True Story." Depicted as an unmistakable and repellent stereotype, she "aspires to be the biggest fence in New York." She finances bank robberies, starts a school for pickpockets, and also has a class for safecrackers and another to teach assorted kinds of violence. She personally orders and supervises the beating up of "slow payers."

When you see groups of children reading this and hear them chuckle and fill in the derogatory epithets and appellations, the result of the indoctrination is clear. It partially explains some recent episodes of vandalism and attacks on children.

The Great Women Superheroes

TRINA ROBBINS

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IN 1938 TWO TEENAGE BOYS, JERRY SIEGEL AND JOE SHUSTER, INTRODUCED their creation, Superman, in *Action Comics* #1, and superheroes entered the world's consciousness. Their story of a superpowered foundling from another planet had been rejected by every comic strip syndicate and comic book editor to whom it had been submitted before being accepted by Harry Donenfeld for publication in his new *Action Comics*. Inspired by the energetic leadership of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the attempts of the government to alleviate the Depression through the programs of the New Deal, the Superman stories struck a chord in the minds and hearts of Americans. Within a year, Superman had his own comic book; within two years, Siegel and Shuster's oft-rejected creation was also a syndicated comic strip appearing in over 250 newspapers, and the comic book was selling a million copies per month.

The success of the Superman character naturally led to imitation, and new superheroes popped up almost faster than a speeding bullet. In 1939, Batman emerged from his batcave to avenge his murdered parents in *Detective Comics* #27, and within a year he had his own book. By 1940, National Periodical Publications had concluded that superheroes were here to stay, and introduced the Flash, the fastest man alive, in his own title, while DC featured superheroes like Hawkman, who dressed like a hawk and spoke to birds, in features in anthology books like *Detective Comics*.

1940 saw other comic book companies create their own superheroes. The Fawcett Company was the home of Captain Marvel, really a twelve-year-old boy who said the magic word "Shazam" to become invincible. Timely Comics followed suit with the Human Torch, who possessed the unique ability to burst into flame, and Sub-Mariner, who swam up from the depths of the ocean to fight humans, but later switched his enmity to the Axis.

Accompanied by colorful sound effects like *Bam*, *Crash*, and *Pow!*, scores of other costumed heroes flew, swam, raced, and punched their way through

the pages of comic books. Aside from their brightly colored longjohns, the one thing these heroes had in common was their gender. But the first costumed superheroine also appeared in 1940. In the pages of *Thrilling Comics*, undercover policewoman Peggy Allen decided she could do a better job solving crimes if she donned a disguise—a long red hooded robe and matching mask. Evildoers and the police she assisted had no idea that The Woman in Red was actually a policewoman, and thus she was also the first superheroine with a secret identity. The Woman in Red appeared sporadically in the pages of *Thrilling Comics* throughout the next five years, but unlike most of the superheroes who appeared in the initial burst of creativity that followed the appearance of Superman in *Action Comics*, the character was never given her own book and is almost completely forgotten today.

This was the plight of most comic book action heroines. None had ever appeared in her own book, and they were invariably short-lived, rarely lasting for more than three appearances before fading into permanent obscurity. Often they were merely sidekicks of the more important male hero. For the most part, when women appeared in comics they were relegated to the role of girlfriend, and their purpose was to be rescued by the hero. Girl readers could find little in the way of heroic role models in the pages of comic books.

In December 1941, a psychologist named William Moulton Marston remedied this sorry state of affairs forever. As early as 1937, Marston and comic book entrepreneur Max Gaines had discussed the creation of a comic book superheroine. Marston is certainly one of the more unusual figures in the history of comic art. The inventor of the lie detector, Marston was a member of the Massachusetts Bar, holder of a doctorate in psychology from Harvard University, a successful advertising man, and the author of popular and scholarly books and articles on psychology.

Marston and Gaines came up with several concepts that they hoped would attract women readers, including a female version of Tarzan named Diana (after the classical goddess of the hunt), but none was immediately translated into comic book form. However, in 1941, Marston's heroine at last debuted, first in *All Star Comics* #8, and one month later in *Sensation Comics* #1. This character was the Amazon Princess Diana, who became Wonder Woman when she left the land of the Amazons to become a costumed superheroine.

It had taken both Superman and Batman a year after their first appearances to get their own books, but less than six months after her appearance in *Sensation*, the Summer 1942 issue of *Wonder Woman* #1 arrived on the newsstands, and the amazing Amazon had her own title. At its peak, the monthly *Wonder Woman* comic book sold around two and a half million copies, and by 1944 she even had her own newspaper comic strip.

Marston knew exactly how to go about creating a superheroine for girls. In 1943, he wrote an article for *The American Scholar* in which he described the reasoning that went into Wonder Woman's creation:

> It seemed to me, from a psychological angle, that the comics worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity. . . . It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous, but it's sissified, according to exclusively male rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. "Aw, that's girl stuff," snorts our young comics reader. "Who wants to be a girl?" And that's the point: not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength . . . Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weak ones.

Marston went on to describe the reactions of publishers to his suggestion that girls might want to read about and identify with a strong heroine:

> My suggestion was met by a storm of mingled protests and guffaws. Didn't I know that heroines had been tried in pulps and comics and, without exception, found failure? Yes, I pointed out, but they weren't superwomen.

Although Marston's article in *The American Scholar* was published under his own name for an audience of his professional peers, indicating that he was proud to have been the creator and scriptwriter for *Wonder Woman*, all his comic book work appeared under the pseudonym Charles Moulton. The writing of his early *Wonder Woman* scripts was a family affair. Marston's wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, was also a psychologist, and she had a hand in the Amazon princess's creation. His son, Pete, sent in story ideas from college and was paid twenty-five dollars for each one that was used.

Writing his scripts in longhand, Marston combined his knowledge of psychology with elements from mythology and fairy tales to create the mystical Paradise Island, the homeland of the Amazons where men are forbidden to tread. Princess Diana's origin springs directly from classical mythology. The mythic hero is usually born from the union of a virgin and a god, and when the virginal Amazon queen Hippolyta desires a child, the goddess Aphrodite instructs her to mold one out of clay, then breathes life into the statue. Thus, Wonder Woman's divine parent is, in this case, a female deity, and little Diana has two mommies.

When Steve Trevor, an intelligence officer from the United States, crashes his plane on Paradise Island, he is rescued and nursed back to health by

Princess Diana. She saves his life with the "purple ray," falls in love with him, and eventually takes him back to America. Disguised as an Army nurse, and later as Lieutenant Diana Prince, she stays in "the man's world" to fight injustice as Wonder Woman. With her she brings some accouterments of science fiction and fantasy: a magic golden lasso which compels anyone caught in its links to obey the lasso's holder, an invisible plane which Wonder Woman can contact telepathically, and a "mental radio," which resembles a small TV set in the shape of a Greek temple.

Just as one can't envision Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* without the illustrations of Sir John Tenniel, nor imagine the world of A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* in any other way than that created by the Ernest H. Shepard illustrations, so Wonder Woman was defined for all time by her original illustrator Harry G. Peter. H. G. Peter's art appeared as early as the teens, when he did cartoons for the humor magazines *Judge* and *Leslie's*. He also contributed some minor stories to other comic books, but nothing else approached the level of his *Wonder Woman* art. Working in a style utterly unlike that seen anywhere else in comics, perhaps because he was older than most comic artists, Peter lent an almost *art nouveau* air to the fairy tale-like stories. With bold brushstrokes he fleshed out Marston's Amazon maiden, giving her thick, curly Mediterranean hair, a strong, well-defined chin, and the slim, muscular body of an Olympic swimming champion.

Marston and Peter were a perfect creative team—a rare occurrence in comics—and it is impossible to imagine one without the other. In 1943, for a reason we will probably never know (perhaps illness kept Peter from meeting his deadlines), the Wonder Woman stories in two issues of *Sensation* were drawn by cartoonist and illustrator Frank Godwin. Godwin was an excellent artist, better than Peter, and he had many book illustrations to his credit as well as two successful comic strips, *Connie* and *Rusty Riley*, yet the comic looks wrong. It's beautifully drawn, but it just isn't *Wonder Woman*.

On Harry G. Peter's elegant pages, there are often entire sequences in which not one male can be found. *Wonder Woman* as written by Marston is, like Paradise Island, a women's world. Women are always the strongest characters in the stories. The handsome but befuddled Steve Trevor exists because of an unwritten law of superhero comics: the hero must have a love interest so there will always be someone to rescue. He is the Lois Lane to Wonder Woman's Superman.

Even the majority of the villains are women. They are always very beautiful, and eventually wind up seeing the error of their ways, thanks to the message of love and humanitarianism that Wonder Woman carries to the world as she rights wrongs. In a 1947 *Wonder Woman*, Queen Atomia, the exotic, dagger-nailed ruler of an atom world, tries to destroy Wonder Woman. The Amazon

princess subdues her and takes her to Reform Island, the Amazons' reform school. On the way her invisible plane flies over Starr Sanitarium for crippled children, and they see children on crutches. The flame-haired villainess asks, "Why are those children leaning on wooden sticks?" In response to Wonder Woman's explanation, she sneers, "Bah! Why bother with weak people?" But on Reform Island, the Amazon Mala puts a girdle of Venus metal on the Atom Queen, explaining that "While she wears it she will have new understanding!" And indeed, "No sooner is the magic girdle around her than Queen Atomia falls repentantly on her knees." She says, "This girdle makes me feel so different. It makes me hate all the evil things I've done!" Eventually the goddess Aphrodite herself welds the girdle permanently on Atomia, telling her, "I weld thy Venus girdle on thee with the powers of eternal love! . . . Forever thy heart shall overflow with kindness. Thou shalt ever be devoted to the worship of love, beauty and humanity!" Returning to her atom world, she informs her subjects, "We must love, not hate!" Finally, she cures the crippled children of Starr Sanitarium. In a last panel that demonstrates America's postwar faith in atomic power as a miracle cure, the children have thrown aside their crutches and are playing ball and leapfrog, while Wonder Woman says, "The atomic universe shall ever shine to help humanity—its radio rays healing children's diseases."

The most powerful humanistic message in Wonder Woman, and the one most constantly repeated, is that super powers are not necessary for a girl to become a superheroine; the Amazon princess herself does not really possess super powers. Her incredible strength, speed, and agility are the results of superior Amazon training, and with comparable training any woman or girl could become a wonder woman. This was demonstrated not just in the stories about Wonder Woman herself, but also in a feature that appeared in every issue of the comic book, "Wonder Women of History." Credited to associate editor and tennis champion Alice Marble, these short comic stories told about real-life heroines like Florence Nightingale and Amelia Earhart who made and changed history.

To prove this point, Wonder Woman sometimes brought her message to real girls. In a story that ran in *Sensation Comics* in 1946, she meets little Olive Norton, who wants to play baseball with her brothers, but is a failure. "Girls can't play ball! Olive's no good," says one brother. Wonder Woman consoles the crying girl, who has just struck out: "Let's face the facts. You're not as good as the boys. Why? Because you haven't practiced and developed your muscles the way they have." She continues, "You can be as strong as any boy if you'll work hard and train yourself in athletics, the way boys do." Olive returns to Paradise Island with Wonder Woman and undergoes a crash course in Amazon training. She succeeds admirably—Wonder Woman exclaims, "I knew Olive

could be a real athlete. All she needed was our Amazon training"—and leaps from the invisible plane right onto the diamond where her brothers are playing ball. The new, improved Olive proceeds to hit a home run, rescue her brother Jimmy from quicksand, and even help Wonder Woman capture a band of spies.

The Amazon's sidekicks are women, too, mostly students hailing from Holliday College. In contrast, most male villains, like Dr. Psycho or the Duke of Deception, are grotesque and stunted creatures who are beyond redemption. Wonder Woman has to battle them over and over again.

This emphasis on the female has led a great many writers (all male) to comment on what they have seen as lesbianism in the early Wonder Woman comic books. As early as 1954, Dr. Fredric Wertham, in his critical book about the harmful effect of comics on children, *Seduction of the Innocent*, referred to Wonder Woman "as the Lesbian counterpart of Batman." This set the theme for future writers, like Jim Harmon, writing in the anthology *All in Color for a Dime*, who called the comic "a very sick scene." He wrote that Wonder Woman would "exchange hugs and kisses of delight with the readily available Holliday Girls."

Actually, in twenty-five Wonder Woman comic stories from the forties, I counted five portrayals of Wonder Woman embracing another woman. Twice she hugged a little girl, once a dying woman. Princess Diana also often embraces her mother. Presumably this is permissible. Of course, what Harmon and other male writers are not taking into account is that women do show their emotions, and do hug. On the other hand, American men are notoriously afraid of being considered homosexual, and never touch each other except when playing sports. These writers also conveniently ignore their favorite superhero comics, where the action takes place in an almost entirely male world. Marston understood that just as young boys tend to avoid anything female, girls of the same age are not interested in boys or men, and identify most strongly with other girls and women.

Marston has also been accused of filling his comic book stories with bondage and with male bashing. In his 1970 book, *The Steranko History of Comics*, James Steranko stated, "Wonder Woman delighted in beating up men." Similarly, Richard Reynolds went so far as to write in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, that Wonder Woman was "developed as a frank appeal to male fantasies of sexual domination"! In fact, the stories rarely depicted the Amazon princess using physical force on her protagonists, except in defense of someone weaker. In her own defense, she usually resorted to the Amazon game of "bullets and bracelets"—deflecting the bullets with her heavy steel bracelets. And, rather than punching them out, she used her magic lasso to capture the

bad guys and compel them to obey her. Compared to most male-oriented action comics, *Wonder Woman* was pretty nonviolent. In a 1948 *Wonder Woman*, Queen Hippolyta expresses once again the constant humanitarian theme of the comic: "Wonder Woman never relaxes her vigilance against those who seek to rule people by brute force! She teaches that love is the greatest force . . . "

As far the accusations of bondage, the fact is that in comics from the 1940s, if the heroes weren't getting tied up so that they could escape from their bonds, their girlfriends were getting tied up so that they could be rescued by the heroes. Some heroes got tied up more than others. Aside from the word "Shazam," the most frequently used expression in Captain Marvel comics was "Shaz-ugh," as little Billy Batson got knocked unconscious before he could utter the magic word that turned him into a superhero. This was the story's conflict. The poor kid would always awaken bound and gagged, thus unable to say the word, until he somehow managed to loosen his gag, shout "Shazam!," become Captain Marvel, and bring the villains to justice. Still, I have never read anything about the bondage in *Captain Marvel*. Wonder Woman's situation was somewhat similar to that of Billy Batson. Symbolically, Wonder Woman could not break her chains if she had been chained by a man. So, in story after story, she had to find some other way of escaping her bonds and emerging victorious.

Most men who have written about comic book history are not particularly kind to superheroines, but they seem to reserve their most unkind observations for Wonder Woman, the longest-lasting and most popular superheroine of all. Les Daniels demonstrated his awareness of this when he wrote in his 1970 book, *Comix: a History of Comic Books in America*: "Masculine critics have viewed her [Wonder Woman] with a mixture of contempt and alarm." But then he betrayed his own masculine attitudes when he added: "In the hands of artist Harry Peter she was perhaps the least visually attractive of comic book heroines . . . " He neglected to inform the reader by what standard he made this judgment, and one wonders if it was not the same standard Jules Feiffer used in his 1965 book, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*. Among his comments on Wonder Woman, Feiffer refers to his younger self as wondering, "Why was she so flat-chested?" Alone of all male critics, Feiffer had the self-awareness to declare, "I never knew they [girls] read her [*Wonder Woman*]—or any comic book. That girls had a preference for my brand of literature would have been more of a frightening image to me than any number of men being beaten up by Wonder Woman." Perhaps Fredric Wertham was correct when he wrote, "For boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image."

Marston himself foresaw these reactions when, in his 1943 article, he described the negative reactions to his proposed superheroine. "Well, asserted

my masculine authorities, if a woman hero were stronger than a man, she would be even less appealing. Boys wouldn't stand for that; they'd resent the strong gal's superiority."

But for generations of girls, the inspiration received from stories of the amazing Amazon is best expressed by pioneer feminist Gloria Steinem who, in her introduction to a 1972 collection of Wonder Woman stories, described "the relief, the sweet vengeance, the toe-wriggling pleasure of reading about a woman who was strong, beautiful, courageous, and a fighter for social justice."

Fandom and Authorship

WILL BROOKER

Reprinted by permission from *Batman Unmasked* (Continuum, 2000), 250–79.

THE DISCOURSES OF COMIC FANDOM AND COMIC AUTHORSHIP WERE BORN AS twins and have grown up together over the last few decades, siblings locked into a relationship of debate and mutual dependence. Both originated in the early 1960s [in fact the history of letters pages and fandom in comics predates the 1960s, but Brooker is focusing here on their role in superhero comics specifically—*eds.*]. While artists like Bob Kane were lucky enough to enjoy a rare cult of authorship during the 1940s, taking working vacations in Hollywood and posing for publicity snaps with glamour girls on Miami Beach,[1] and the first DC Comics fanzines appeared in the early 1950s, just before the crackdown,[2] these were exceptions rather than early signs of a trend.

According to Gerard Jones in *The Comic Book Heroes*, it was DC that first opened its pages to reader response through the letter columns of *Superman* and *Justice Society of America*, edited respectively by Mort Weisinger and Julius Schwartz.[3] The year was 1960. That September, "at a Pittsburgh science fiction convention . . . two young couples simultaneously conceived fanzines that devoted regular attention to comics." The editors of *Xero* and *Comic Art* "were far removed from Weisinger's young letter-writers":

> the new fanzine publishers were adults looking back, with little emotional investment in the present, while Weisinger's kids were the opposite, all waiting for the next issue of Superman with no sense of comics history. Before fandom could have any real effect on the field, the gap between them would have to be bridged. And who else could engineer that bridge but Mort's old partner in fandom, Julius Schwartz?

Jones has the journalistic tendency of turning comics history into a comfortable yarn, eliding ambiguity for the sake of a good story teleologically told. It is hard to know, as was the case with his account of William Dozier's epiphany over the *Batman* title, whether the scheme of events was really this