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**Wonder Woman Wears Pants: *Wonder Woman*, Feminism and the
1972 “Women’s Lib” Issue**

Ann Matsuuchi

Envisioning the comic book superhero Wonder Woman as a feminist activist defending a women’s clinic from pro-life villains at first seems to be the kind of story found only in fan art, not in the pages of the canonical series itself. Such a radical character reworking did not seem so outlandish in the American cultural landscape of the early 1970s. What the word “woman” meant in ordinary life was undergoing unprecedented change. It is no surprise that the iconic image of a female superhero, physically and intellectually superior to the men she rescues and punishes, would be claimed by real-life activists like Gloria Steinem. In the following essay I will discuss the historical development of the character and relate it to her presentation during this pivotal era in second wave feminism. A six issue story culminating in a reproductive rights battle waged by Wonder Woman-as-ordinary-woman-in-pants was unfortunately never realised and has remained largely forgotten due to conflicting accounts and the tangled politics of the publishing world. The following account of the only published issue of this story arc, the 1972 Women’s Lib issue of *Wonder Woman*, will demonstrate how looking at mainstream comic books directly has much to recommend it to readers interested in popular representations of gender and feminism.

Wonder Woman is an iconic comic book superhero, first created not as a female counterpart to a male superhero, but as an independent, title-

supporting character. In 2011, seventy years have passed since her original appearance, an occasion celebrated by another failed return to the television format as well as a story reboot in a new comic book series. Online fans and commentators wonder at Hollywood's inability to include her in the continuing trend of films centered on lesser known characters,¹ and how media attention is limited to her costume changes.² The image of Wonder Woman in her stars-and-stripes costume from the classic comic book era and the popular late 1970s American television series continually reappears as an appropriated feminist mascot, yet the character is rarely engaged beyond this superficial level. The storytelling in the comic book series has been as uneven as its sales figures, a reflection of how depicting an idealised woman is a challenge given how unstable and untenable the concept of womanhood is.

This is well illustrated by the publication history and reception of the *Wonder Woman* Women's Lib issue discussed in the following pages. In 1972, science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany, known for his feminist-sympathetic work, was asked by editor Denny O'Neil to script a few politically relevant stories as part of a "reboot" of the series. In an interview conducted in accompaniment to the Vintage edition of Delany's *Dhalgren*, he describes a planned story sequence that was abruptly cut by DC Comics:

I came up with a six-issue story arc, each with a different villain: the first was a corrupt department store owner; the second was the head of a supermarket chain who tries to squash a women's food co-operative. Another villain was a college advisor who really felt a woman's place was in the home and who assumed if you were a bright woman, then something was probably wrong with you psychologically, and so forth. It worked up to a gang of male thugs trying to squash an abortion clinic staffed by women surgeons. And Wonder Woman was going to do battle with each of these and triumph.³

This reimagining of a female superhero combating villainous sexists may have provoked a variety of reactions amongst comic book readers, although it needs to be remembered that their demographics were formerly more heterogeneous. This didactic approach is also more consistent with the intent of Wonder Woman's creator William Moulton Marston, who wanted not only to present role models for young women but to educate male readers.⁴

The surrounding drama that led to Wonder Woman's abbreviated foray into feminist action deserves closer attention, especially since this episode is so frequently misreported or omitted entirely. In 1972 the first issue of

Ms. magazine debuted with Wonder Woman on the cover as well an article about her value as an inspiring symbol of female power. In an attempt at cross-marketing, *Ms.* co-published a collection of select early *Wonder Woman* stories with DC Comics. It opened with an introductory essay by Gloria Steinem that claimed Wonder Woman as a feminist icon.⁵ Steinem's interest and interventions with the development of the Wonder Woman character has continued through the decades since her initial negotiations with DC Comics for use of the Wonder Woman image. In her meetings with the comic book publisher, Steinem complained that the removal of costume and trappings was a shameful disempowering of a beloved female superhero. This complaint was then conveniently used as an excuse to cancel the "Women's Lib" story arc. Steinem's attempts to "save" Wonder Woman inadvertently ended a radical story arc far more politically relevant than the image of a woman in a stars-and-stripes costume. The majority of the historical accounts of the Wonder Woman comic book omit these details and privilege a static and unchanging character over any experimentation.

This chapter in Wonder Woman's history is dismissed as misguided by both readers and by writers O'Neil and Delany, but it provides a revealing insight into the relationship between American comic books and second-wave feminism.⁶ Fan reception to the Women's Lib issue in more recent years generally characterises it as an embarrassing oddity: "... Delany wrote a 'Special Women's Lib' issue that is so bad I have to consider it out of continuity."⁷ These criticisms centre on one panel, where Wonder Woman seems to distance herself from the 1970s feminists protesting on the streets, stating: "In most cases, I don't even **like** women." [Figure. 1] Viewed out of context, this panel supports the characterisation of this Wonder Woman as conservatively apolitical, even anti-feminist. This reading is borne out a protectiveness that echoes Steinem's, and a presumption about the politics of male comic book creators. Nostalgic for images remembered from childhood, any changes, even as minor as an outfit change are too radical to accept.



Figure 1: Samuel R. Delany (w), *Wonder Woman* #203 (Nov./Dec. 1972), [13].

For Umberto Eco, the superhero character performs a mythological role, not as the central subjective lens to interpret events, but as a performatively simple and predictable part of the mythic tale that surrounds him or her:

The mythic character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and, therefore, must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us; the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us. Such a character will take on what we will call an "aesthetic universality," a capacity to serve as a reference point for behavior and feelings which belong to us all. ... The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman)....⁸

This kind of universality also renders traditional nationalist superheroes like Superman and Wonder Woman one-dimensional, empty of the psychological complexities that more ambitious writers might aspire to. Eco also reads the ideological thrust of the superhero myth as conservatively static: "If we examine the ideological contents of Superman stories, we realize that on the one hand that content sustains itself and functions communicatively thanks to the narrative structure; on the other hand, the stories help define their expressive structure as the circular, static conveyance of a pedagogic message which is substantially immobilistic."⁹ Marco Pellitteri goes beyond this and locates all traditional superhero comics within fundamentally right-wing ideologies.¹⁰

If readers step outside of the timelessness of the comic book universe, Superman's apolitical stance seems irresponsible, his closeted identity serving only to protect the innocence of the one woman he loves (although it is a deeply repressed love). According to Eco, "[I]n Superman we have a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness."¹¹ His actions are localised in a clear-cut, unproblematic way, largely ineffectual in changing society as a whole. Wonder Woman is an interesting contrast in that her adventures and closeting serve an explicitly political purpose, working as an undercover agent for the foreign, utopian Amazons. Historian Lori Landay describes Wonder Woman's secret identity as a kind of "female female impersonation," where her "normal" female persona serves to protect the macho insecurities of the military men she dutifully rescues.¹² The *Wonder Woman* storylines that followed creator William Moulton Marston's death in 1947 increasingly

turned towards superficial romances and narrowly averted marriage proposals, a sharp contrast to the progressive slant of her “classic era” adventures, described by Steinem as explicitly “feminist.”¹³ Before re-evaluating the overlooked political move of the Women’s Lib issue, one needs to consider how this fits well into the history of the Wonder Woman character. To describe her origins as feminist might be an incorrect application of a modern term, but creator William Moulton Marston and his professional and domestic partners Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne hoped that Wonder Woman would help to inspire needed socio-political change.¹⁴

The Birth of Wonder Woman, 1941

William Moulton Marston, Harvard psychologist and inventor of the first polygraph test, created the Wonder Woman character with a stated pedagogic intent. In a 1937 *New York Times* interview, Marston, with seemingly genuine optimism, predicted that “within 100 years the country will see the beginning of a sort of Amazonian matriarchy. Within 500 years a ‘definite sex battle for supremacy’ would occur, and after a millennium ‘women would take over rule of the country, politically and economically.’”¹⁵ In an attempt to avert the sort of moral censorship that led to the Hays Code in Hollywood, comic book publishers at the time sought institutional support from psychologists and educators, prominently listing their names as part of an editorial advisory board. Marston was hired as a psychological consultant and hoped to utilise this popular medium as an “emotional re-educator,” using images of gender reversal to inspire social change.¹⁶ His vision of a feminised utopia was distant: a 1943 cover of *Wonder Woman* issue #7 depicts an American presidential campaign 1000 years in the future, with Wonder Woman standing triumphantly over a crowd of supporters [Figure 2]. The story in this issue presents images and themes typical of Marston’s stories: normal human females successfully acting as presidents, professors, and police officers; female attributes of emotion and “love” accompanied by physical strength and intellect; male characters in need of protection (boyfriend Steve Trevor); one-dimensionally misogynistic villains (possessing names such as “Professor Manly”) and female physical and mental domination of men (recurring images of bondage). These “classic era” *Wonder Woman* issues scripted by Marston were accompanied with educational biographical accounts of real-life “wonder women” like Susan B. Anthony and Joan of Arc to demonstrate to young female and male readers that female strength was not a fantastic supposition [Figure 3].

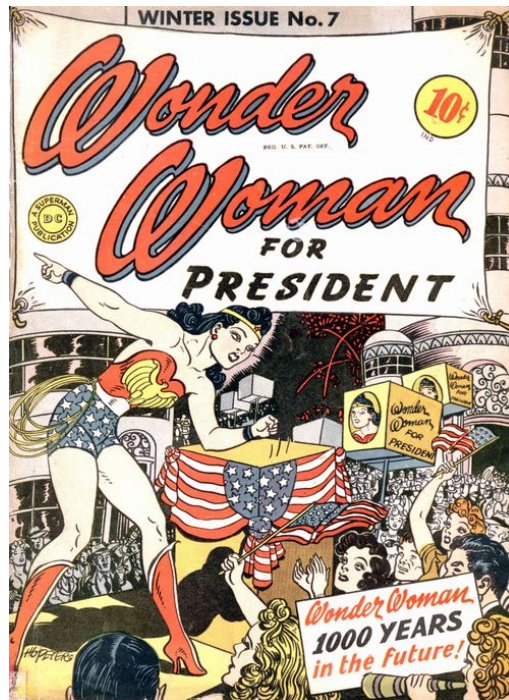


Figure 2: Charles Moulton [William Moulton Marston] (w), and Harry G. Peters (a), Wonder Woman 7 (Winter 1943): cover.

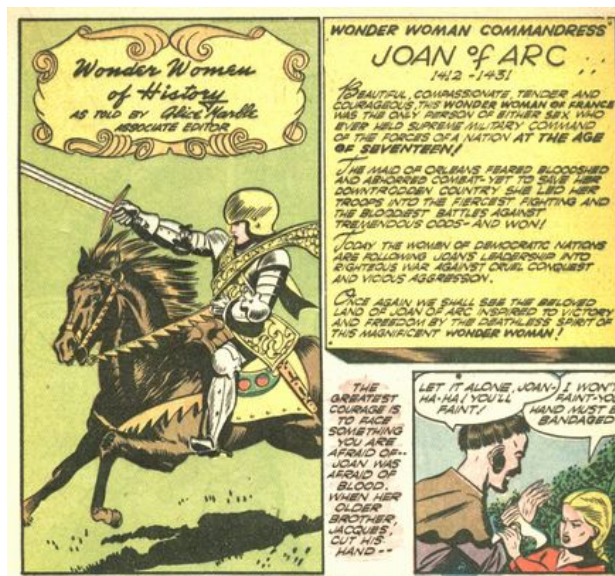


Figure 3:

Charles Moulton [William Moulton Marston] (w), and Harry G. Peters (a), Wonder Woman 7 (Winter 1943): [18].

That Marston was successful in finding a vehicle for a pro-woman agenda is no doubt due in part to concurrent wartime needs for increased female participation in the workforce. Mitra Emad provides an insightful reading of how Wonder Woman's body reflected shifting ideas of gender and nationalism:

In Marston's *Wonder Woman*, an independent, empowered woman (vs. "a weak girl") is constructed in the service of nationalism and "the good fight" of a nation at war. The "Rosie the Riveter" context and Marston's reformist notions of women's empowerment contextualize the character's star-spangled costume as well as forays into revisionist history that call on essentialized categories of "woman" and "American."¹⁷

Marston's motivations were also informed by the personal experiences of the two women in his life. Marston lived openly with two co-wives, Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne, who have been credited as being co-creators of the Wonder Woman character.¹⁸ Elizabeth Holloway Marston reported that it was she who first identified the need for a female superhero who presented a more positive alternative in how she saved the world.¹⁹ Holloway Marston and Byrne continued their relationship long after Marston's death in 1947.

The presence of nationalistic and occasionally racist caricatures in early *Wonder Woman* stories cannot be overlooked, but it can be argued that these elements were far less interesting to Marston than the repositioned female body and symbols of a "female" solution to political problems. From the first issue, we see a reversal of an expected set-up: a male soldier cradled in the muscled arms of a young woman. Wonder Woman's weapon of choice, a "lasso of truth," reflected Marston's invention, the lie detector, a crime-fighting tool that he thought of as less violent than others.²⁰ Villains submitted willingly to Wonder Woman after being bound by her chains of love. Marston did not hesitate to utilise these images to suggest the psychologically beneficial uses of bondage, although this helped fuel a postwar backlash against unconventional images of femininity.

In 1954, another psychological crusader, Fredric Wertham, published *Seduction of the Innocent*, claiming that comic books corrupted children with images of violence and sexual deviancy. Wertham's complaints were specific and hostile, decrying the presence of Batman and Robin's performative homosociality. These charges led to congressional inquiry and the creation of the self-censoring Comics Code Authority by comic book publishers, which functioned much like the MPAA rating system.²¹ DC Comics persists in an inconsistent, unpredictable defense of its

superheroes' sexual normativity, evidenced by a series of company actions against scholars, publications and artists that dare to out superheroes, referring to "canonical" textual reasons as justification.²² Wertham also criticised Wonder Woman for being a dangerous lesbian representation, saying that "[t]he homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable."²³ Wonder Woman's sidekicks, a team of college sorority women, were referred to as "gay party girls."²⁴ While this sounds more like anxiety about the image of a physically strong, independent female body, Wertham's complaints about Wonder Woman's affection for bondage cannot be denied. Les Daniels suggests that Marston intentionally made Wonder Woman's favorite exclamation "Suffering Sappho!" as a humorous in-joke.²⁵ Wertham did share Marston's beliefs that popular culture had a responsibility to promote progressive social change. His more important contributions towards the desegregation of public schools are not as remembered as his censure of comic books.²⁶ Wertham's efforts serve to explain how American comic books lost mainstream readership as a paraliterary genre, and informed the strategies employed by comic book publishers to gain respectability.

The 1960s Reboot: Wonder Woman as Diana Prince

Following post-war cultural shifts and Marston's death in 1947, the *Wonder Woman* series grew more conservative and storylines recast it as a women's romance comic. In 1968 writer Denny O'Neil and artist/writer Mike Sekowsky were asked to rework the title in a manner that might boost lagging sales. The Wonder Woman character has been challenging to write convincingly, and they identified the costume and superpowers as particular hindrances. The series was re-titled "Diana Prince: Wonder Woman" and the Wonder Woman character was transformed into a woman with a martial arts teacher named I Ching. O'Neil proceeded to kill off the character of Steve Trevor, Wonder Woman's love interest, eliminating the possibility of any further marriage plots. The familiar superhero device of a split identity was collapsed: the dull working woman in glasses was replaced by a made-over secret agent who resembled the Diana Rigg character from the contemporary popular television show *The Avengers*.²⁷ With sales still not significantly improving, O'Neil was named editor of the *Wonder Woman* comic book serial in 1972, which allowed him to ask Samuel Delany to write stories that centred on relevant social issues like the women's movement. Delany later questioned this choice, suggesting that O'Neil and DC Comics ought to have hired a female writer for the job.²⁸

Delany, a prolific and admired writer whose diverse body of work includes literary criticism and pornography, was well-known at the time for

writing award-winning science fiction novels and short stories. He was hired to write the scripts for a six issue story arc of the *Wonder Woman* series. Only the first story was successfully published, the “Grandee Caper” (hereafter referred to as the Women's Lib issue). In *Wonder Woman* issue #203 (November-December 1972), labelled on the cover as the “Special! Women's Lib Issue,” the setting was the streets of New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1970s, where both Delany and O’Neil lived at the time [Figure 4]. This *Wonder Woman* is not represented as a flawless ideal, but as an everyday woman whose heroism lies in real-life feminist politics.



Figure 4: Samuel R. Delany (w) and

Dick Giordano (a), *Wonder Woman* 203 (November/December 1972): cover.

From the cover art this depiction of “women's lib” seems consistent with the expected comic book formula: a sexy dark haired woman haloed by savage beasts comes to the rescue of a blonde in bondage, breasts jutting out invitingly. Within the comic book itself, the action centres on *Wonder Woman*/Diana Prince and her friend Cathy campaigning with a local “women's lib” group that demands equal pay for female employees from a corrupt department store owner. Despite being well-received by a few hopeful fans at the time,²⁹ fan reception since has been largely dismissive: “incoherent”³⁰ and “very anti-male.”³¹ As a stand-alone issue, the story is problematic and unsatisfying, but its ambitious intents make it worth re-examining. Delany and O’Neil present female experiences of daily life as difficult and complicated within the confines of a comic book format.

This Wonder Woman undergoes a transformation more revealing than simply a change of clothes. Here she is a politically ambivalent woman, facing the adventure of locating adequate housing and financial support, slowly discovering her role in the new women's movement of the 1970s. In the following pages we will look more closely at how this new incarnation of Wonder Woman was embarking on a series of stories that would have defied traditional conceptions of womanhood in a manner that followed the approach of William Marston.

Not only was the Women's Lib issue incorrectly described, but the omission of this attempt by Gloria Steinem in her subsequent essays and interviews adds to the confusion of incomplete historical accounts. The main structural weakness of this story lies in how its direction was so easily misread. Diana Prince's character development called for a motivational ambiguity in this initial story, a factor which contributed to how it was interpreted as expressing a backward, sexist sentiment, rather than an explicitly feminist political message. Les Daniels calls this attempt at reaching out to a female readership "too little too late," describing how "a quasi-official feminist position in opposition to the new *Wonder Woman* had already been successfully staked out by an individual who was becoming the character's best friend and severest critic: Gloria Steinem."³² In 1972, *Ms.* magazine published its first stand-alone issue, and Gloria Steinem sought to appropriate her image for an eye-catching inaugural cover [Figure 5]. This began her continuing ownership of the Wonder Woman character in American media commentary.

Steinem's interactions with the DC Comics publishers began with her negotiating for use of the image as symbolic of the feminist movement. Her criticisms suggest that the publishers failed to report *Wonder Woman's* feminist directions either intentionally or out of ignorance, but they likely allowed use of the image as a potentially profitable marketing move. The *Ms.* cover recalls the 1943 comic book cover that declared Wonder Woman president, but contrasts it in how she dominates the scene. Rather than present her addressing a crowd of female voters, here Wonder Woman towers above, like a monster stomping on city streets. She rescues American homes from a background of war and violence.



Figure 5: *Ms.* 1, No. 1. (July 1972): cover.

Recalling the significance of Wonder Woman's classic costume in her youth, Steinem arranged and wrote the introduction for a reprinted collection of selected classic Marston-era *Wonder Woman* stories in 1972, part of a publishing collaboration with *Ms.* magazine. In this introduction she describes Wonder Woman's fall from grace:

Like so many of her real-life sisters in the postwar era of conservatism and 'togetherness' of the 1950s, she had fallen on very hard times. ... By the 1960s, Wonder Woman had given up her magic lasso, her bullet deflecting bracelets, her invisible plane, and all her Amazonian powers. ... She had become a kind of female James Bond, though much more boring because she was denied his sexual freedom.³³

In the DC Comics offices, the comments Steinem made about this "watered-down" Wonder Woman and about the importance of the costume and superpowers became the official reason for promptly ending the "Women's Lib" story arc and returning *Wonder Woman* to her classic costume and storylines.³⁴ Steinem was not likely made aware about how the "disempowered" Wonder Woman was slated to specifically address feminist issues, including the defense of a woman-run abortion clinic. Yet she failed to fully investigate how the comic book was written and did not enter into conversation with any of the men or the few women in the comic book workroom. Steinem's successful appropriation of the Wonder Woman image seems to be inadequate justification for valorisation.

The Women's Lib issue ended with a surprising cliffhanger: a debate and challenge within Wonder Woman's feminist action group. How could

the sudden cancellation of this kind of story arc also represent a progressive “rebirth” of a feminist hero?³⁵ In a critical work about feminist superheroes Lillian Robinson describes periods in *Wonder Woman's* history as “either feminist or not,” and describes the entire non-costumed era as “decidedly 'not.'”³⁶ Robinson goes on to refer to the following issue, #204, as “the first cover of the 'feminist' epoch.”³⁷ This summary follows the account of events found in Steinem's introductions to the two *Wonder Woman* collections from 1972 and 1995 and the piece called “Wonder Woman Revisited” written by Joanne Edgar for the first issue of *Ms.* rather than what we see in the comic books themselves.³⁸

Artist Mike Sekowsky had proposed this reworking of *Wonder Woman* not as a taming or “watering down” but rather as a creative move with the intent of improving the comic:

What they were doing in *Wonder Woman*, ... I didn't see how a kid, male or female, could relate to it. It was so far removed from their world. I felt girls might want to read about a super female in the real world, something very current. So I created a new book, new characters, everything....³⁹

The trend in superhero characterisation at that time was to depict more realistically flawed and human protagonists whose complexity challenged traditional notions of the hero. This did not result in an appealing, sympathetic hero for readers who preferred the invulnerable powerful goddess remembered from childhood. Unfortunately, Sekowsky's input into the direction of the stories after *Wonder Woman's* new introduction was not maintained.⁴⁰

At this time Denny O'Neil had evident political ambitions for his work, continuing the commercial and critical success of his work with *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*.⁴¹ O'Neil's reasoning for killing off *Wonder Woman's* boyfriend Steve Trevor seems not intended to de-sexualise *Wonder Woman*, but mainly because he was a “dull character.”⁴² O'Neil specifically hoped to articulate an explicitly feminist message and interpreted her loss of superpowers, costume and boyfriend as a more realistic empowerment of an ordinary woman.⁴³

The storyline in the *Women's Lib* issue only hints at the internal workings of the *Wonder Woman/Diana Prince* character, but chooses to focus on her material, everyday struggles, issues that Delany engages with in many of his other works. Financial problems cause Diana Prince to temporarily stay with her friend, Cathy, a “women's lib” activist, in a Lower East Side New York City tenement apartment. Along with the costume, *Wonder Woman* has shed the secret identity and now inhabits her ordinary Diana Prince character exclusively. Readers are asked to witness Diana

Prince's experiences and consider why she initially doubts the efficacy of feminist activism. When asked to help campaign with Cathy's political action group for equal pay for female employees of a department store owner, Diana Prince's initial reaction is skeptical and standoffish. The continuing story shows a growing awareness of how uncomfortable being a woman is for her in the society she has immigrated to.

Diana Prince is a homeless and unemployed woman who is tempted by a job offer from the villainous store owner, Philip Grandee [Figure 6]. Grandee offers her both a penthouse apartment and a thousand dollar a week salary for her celebrity endorsement of his store, a marketing move involving the "Wonder Woman" character that referentially suggests what happens outside of the text. Grandee wants to appropriate the image of Wonder Woman and of women's liberation for commercial purposes, all while engaging in practices that oppress ordinary women.



Figure 6: Samuel R. Delany (w) and Dick Giordano (a), *Wonder Woman* 203 (November/December 1972): [7].

Delany's fictional approach here considers, never assumes, the politics that inform daily life: how we eat, sleep and fuck. These mundane issues rarely arise in the universe of comic book superheroes. Wonder Woman faces an immediate need to "sell out" in order to support herself. The story proceeds in a manner that is at times as blunt and didactic as the traditional comic books often were, but identity and its formation is questioned here in a manner tied materially to everyday life.



Figure 7: Samuel R. Delany (w) and Dick Giordano (a), *Wonder Woman* 203 (November/December 1972): [1].

The villains that Diana Prince has to face in this issue resemble the cartoonish misogynists of the classic era *Wonder Woman*. In the opening scene men on the street taunt Wonder Woman, not as a celebrity, but as an ordinary woman [Figure 7]. The scene is filled with threat, underlying violence and frustration, but not familiar in its depiction. The opening narrator presents this as an everyday example of female humiliation: "Diana Prince has a **problem** this night! And how many women get by **without** having to deal with this dilemma?" The neighbours living upstairs from Cathy present the problems of married life in this transitional period: an unfulfilled housewife who is not permitted to work, and an abusive husband threatened by social change [Figure 8]. The rebirth of this housewife was also to have been explored in the remainder of this story arc.



Figure 8: Samuel R. Delany (w) and Dick Giordano (a), *Wonder Woman* 203 (November/December 1972): [5].

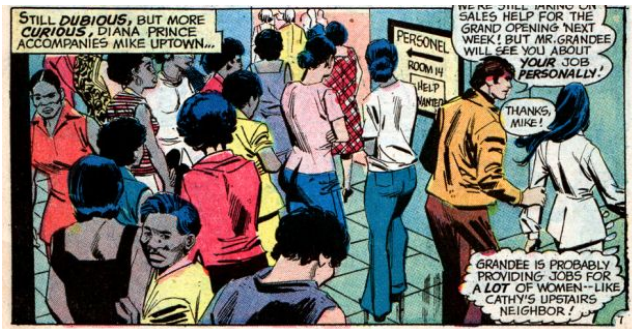


Figure 9: Samuel R. Delany (w) and Dick Giordano (a), *Wonder Woman* 203 (November/December 1972): [7].

Diana Prince does not immediately accept Grandee's job offer, despite her financial circumstances, because she does not fully trust his intentions. The man who brings her to Grandee's office is actually one of the street harassers from the first scene of conflict whom she had successfully thrashed with Cathy's assistance. Diana Prince and Cathy walk past a queue of women applying for sales jobs at the store, mostly women of colour [Figure 9]. Diana Prince proceeds to consider how the women need these jobs regardless of pay equity, and that job prospects for women like the unfulfilled housewife who lives upstairs from Cathy put them in a disadvantaged position.

Cathy's women's liberation group has decided to stage a protest outside Grandee's store to raise awareness of his exploitation of female workers with limited job options. This meeting also introduces both readers and Diana Prince to women involved in the movement, including a psychologist whose statement about the economic and political impact of their action reveals the parallel intent of the text itself [Fig. 10].



Figure 10: Samuel R. Delany (w) and Dick Giordano (a), Wonder Woman 203 (November/December 1972): [18].



Figure 11: Samuel R. Delany (w) and Dick Giordano (a), Wonder Woman 203 (November/December 1972): [27].

A gang of men is hired by Grandee to barge in on their meeting, and they proceed to “begin menacing and vandalizing” with a pack of trained Dobermans.⁴⁴ Cathy is kidnapped and held hostage, but Diana Prince organises a rescue and a physical battle between the women and gang members. The dogs are set free, Cathy is rescued, and the police take Grandee away. The women's group meets again the following night, declaring victory in the store's closure and news is announced that the city government will start investigating wage inequality of all working women. The celebration is cut short though, as another group of women enters the room leaving us with a different kind of exciting cliffhanger. A woman points at them and accuses them of ignoring the very real economic consequences of their actions. With this pointing comes a realisation that their women's group, although it included professors and martial artists, did not include the working-class women whose rights they thought they were defending. This image also serves as an early acknowledgement of the

class conflict present in feminist organisations, particularly relevant in 1972. The sisterhood of the movement was complicated by divisions of race, class and gender. The final frame in the Women's Lib has Diana Prince asking the reader what they would say in response [Figure 11]. She also asks if there is enough time to avert this latest conflict; unfortunately, time ran out for this promising story arc. It was cancelled without any explanation in the following issue.

The next issue of *Wonder Woman*, #204, started what was and continues to be referred to as a feminist rebirth of *Wonder Woman*. In Les Daniels' history of *Wonder Woman*, he attributes this abrupt change as the publisher's reaction to criticism received from "adult feminists" who were nostalgic for the costume and superpowers remembered from their feminist childhoods:

It's a truism that it's not always gratifying to get what you wish for, but the adult feminists who championed the cause of the old Wonder Woman were presumably not constant readers of comic books, and may have been satisfied just to see the star-spangled outfit return on the cover of issue #204 (January-February 1973) which promised "New Adventures of the Original Wonder Woman."⁴⁵

Nothing was said to the editor and writer to indicate that the cancellation was due to publisher anxiety about controversial topics. Sudden changes were not surprising given the frequently recurring strategy of dramatically relabeling comic book series in attempts to boost lagging sales.

Despite the oft-repeated declarations of victory, it remains questionable how much this decision had to do with Gloria Steinem's involvement. Denny O'Neil does not recall ever receiving an official explanation: "It was an experiment, and I think at the time we realized it was an experiment. Whether or not Ms. Steinem has anything to do with that or whether she was brought in because they thought it was time to revert back to an earlier inception of the character, I don't know."⁴⁶ According to Delany's assessment, the reasons seem to be a confluence of coincidences and convenient excuses:

Apparently, Gloria Steinem, who was the editor of *Ms.*, was taking a tour through the DC office one day, and they were proudly showing her *Wonder Woman*. She didn't read the stories. She just looked at some of the artwork, and the next thing she saw was that Wonder Woman was no longer in her American flag and bikini briefs. And she said, 'What's happened to Wonder Woman? You've taken away all her super-powers. Don't you realize how important this is to the young women of America?' Unfortunately, she wasn't paying any attention to the storyline at all. It was just in terms of the image. So I

think probably the Powers That Be were kind of intriguingly dubious about my storyline. They probably were not terrible happy where it was going. So suddenly they say, 'Ah! Gloria Steinem herself has spoken!'" ⁴⁷

However, Delany does not blame Steinem for this turn of events: "It's a case of the world being over-determined—and over-determined in some destructive ways. But Steinem had no idea of the stories her chance comments were used to scuttle."⁴⁸ Unfortunately this episode in Wonder Woman's career continues to be misreported due to the errors contained in the essays written by Steinem and other *Ms.* writers.

In the first issue of *Ms.* from July 1972, Joanne Edgar wrote an essay called "Wonder Woman Revisited" with accompanying selections from classic era *Wonder Woman*. Here credit is given to *Ms.* for helping return Wonder Woman to her original state: "Since Joanne Edgar and others of its founding editors had also been rescued by Wonder Woman in their childhoods, we decided to rescue Wonder Woman in return by putting her on their first cover."⁴⁹ Edgar also declares another feminist victory in a supposedly first-time female editor being appointed to the series: "Next year Wonder Woman will be reborn. With the help of her first woman editor, Dorothy Woolfolk, she will rise again as an Amazon, complete with superhuman powers. *Ms.* Woolfolk also plans to decrease violence in the plots and return our heroine to the feminism of her birth. And maybe politics too?"⁵⁰ Steinem, in a revised 1995 version of her original 1972 introduction to the classic *Wonder Woman* collection that she helped publish, makes the same declaration of the success of a female editor, in the past tense now: "Under the direction of Dorothy Woolfolk, the first woman editor of Wonder Woman in all her long history, she was returned to her original Amazon status—golden lasso, bracelets and all." Steinem then relates a post-victory anecdote: "One day some months after her rebirth, I got a phone call from one of Wonder Woman's tougher male writers. 'Okay,' he said, 'she's got all her Amazon powers back. She talks to the Amazons on Paradise Island. She even has a Black Amazon sister named Nubia. Now will you leave me alone?' I said we would."⁵¹

Les Daniels notes how Steinem was only "half right" back in 1972 and again in 1995.⁵² Dorothy Woolfolk served as editor *before* not after O'Neil, back in the non-costumed era decried by Steinem. This was not a new era of female control of *Wonder Woman*, but it rather marked the end of Woolfolk's long career at DC comics. Lillian Robinson repeats this particular error again, as fact and victory, as recently as 2004.⁵³ With these omissions, these writers effectively erase the credited involvement of the women involved in *Wonder Woman's* history from its very beginnings. Early issues featured photographs of editor Alice Marble, a famous tennis player

who also worked toward desegregating professional tennis [Figure 12]. After Dorothy Woolfolk, there were no female editors of the *Wonder Woman* series until Karen Berger in 1987.

Rather than taking over as new editor, Dorothy Woolfolk returns briefly in another dramatic way in the following issue #204 of *Wonder Woman*. Robert Kanigher, a comic book veteran, was named editor of the traditionally restored *Wonder Woman* at this time. Delany's cliffhanger is not referred to in any way, and Kanigher immediately returns *Wonder Woman* to a more familiar, violent story format. The victims of a serial killer are depicted in the opening pages:



Figure 12: Photograph of Alice Marble; Charles Moulton [William Moulton Marston] (w), and Harry G. Peters (a), *Wonder Woman* #1 (Summer 1942): [1].

"The killer's first victim was 'Dottie Cottonman, women's magazine editor,' an obvious reference to Dorothy Woolfolk and possibly also Gloria Steinem [Figure 13]. Whether Kanigher intended this bizarre reference as a joke, an attack, or a gesture of sympathy is anybody's guess; after a quarter of a century he didn't even remember doing it."⁵⁴ Since Kanigher was not the penciller, it is possible that he may not even have been aware of this referencing at the time. That Woolfolk is represented as a women's magazine editor does suggest that this particular comic book workroom possessed some knowledge of the well-intentioned workings of outsiders and manipulations of cynical bosses.

Dorothy Woolfolk had served as editor of *Wonder Woman* in 1971 for

a few issues (#s 197–198), immediately before Denny O’Neil, but she had a long history of involvement with *Wonder Woman* and with other titles like *Superman*. In the 1940s she was also involved with several issues, working with William Moulton Marston under her maiden name Dorothy Roubicek.⁵⁵ She is also credited with introducing the idea of kryptonite into the *Superman* universe because she thought that an invulnerable superhero would limit writers to dull storylines.⁵⁶ A letter written to Marston in 1943 from All-American Comics president, M.C. Gaines, whose company published the *Wonder Woman* title at the time, mentions her contributions specifically. Gaines requested a reduction of Marston’s favoured images of bondage with chains and needed some potential work-arounds:

Miss Roubicek hastily dashed off this morning the enclosed list of methods which can be used to keep women confined or enclosed without the use of chains. Each one of these can be varied in many ways—enabling us, as I told you in our conference last week, to cut down the use of chains by at least 50 to 75% without at all interfering with the excitement of the story or the sales of the books.⁵⁷

An account of Dorothy Woolfolk’s place in comic book history in *Ms.* magazine’s pages would have made more sense than self-congratulatory exposition.

In 2010, Wonder Woman underwent another costume change intended to revitalise the series, and this is again incorrectly reported by *Ms.* as being an unprecedented move: “DC Comics character and feminist icon Wonder Woman—who graced the first stand-alone issue of *Ms.*—has been revamped for the first time in 69 years.”⁵⁸ Steinem, in comments to the Associated Press regarding the 2010 update, repeats the same erroneous account of *Wonder Woman*’s history: “As in the late ’60s when Wonder Woman creators took away all her magical powers—and would have perished along with them, had not *Ms.* magazine come to the rescue with a lobbying campaign to restore them—I wouldn’t be surprised if it happens again.”⁵⁹

Steinem’s relationship with the Wonder Woman character has been depicted in more recent DC Comics stories that seem to both parody both the women’s liberation movement and the superhero herself. A 2008 graphic novel tie-in scripted by Darwyn Cooke and drawn by J. Bone, *Justice League: The New Frontier*, includes a Wonder Woman chapter entitled “Wonder Woman & Black Canary Fight the Gender War.” The story is set in the “Silver Age” of comic books, and opens with a familiar plot: “It’s 1962 and being politically correct means you’re a Democrat. She’s a woman of distinguished endeavors, but this time the Amazon Princess outdoes herself. Join us as our raven-haired warrior becomes ‘the Mother

of the Movement!"⁶⁰ Black Canary, a secondary female superhero, provides a sarcastic foil to an earnest Wonder Woman who seeks to enlighten the customers of a Playboy Bunny men's club, or "beat them until they cry for their sainted mothers."⁶¹ Wonder Woman's breastplate catches fire in the fray, and she proceeds to pummel the smiling men with her burning bra. In the final panel "Gloria" (known for her undercover stint as a Playboy Bunny) winks knowingly at the reader, perhaps as a gesture alerting readers to how Wonder Woman here is a stand-in for Steinem, the "mother of the movement" [Figure 14]. Wonder Woman, reduced to a sexualised image, continues to have an ambiguous relationship with feminism.



Figure 14: Cooke, Darwyn, J. Bone, and David Bullock. "Wonder Woman & Black Canary Fight the Gender War," in *Justice League: The New Frontier Special*, (New York: DC Comics, 2008): 40.

More recently, Denny O'Neil was given the opportunity to revisit his interpretation of Wonder Woman as Diana Prince in the *DC Retroactive: Wonder Woman—The '70s* special issue, an historical accompaniment to the 2011 *Wonder Woman* reboot. In an interview with illustrator J. Bone, O'Neil is reported to have had misgivings about his earlier attempt at reinventing Wonder Woman: "Boy, did I screw that up!"⁶² In this issue, Wonder Woman returns to her 1970s identity as Diana Prince [Figure 15]. Her white trouser suit reappears and she describes this as being "(o)ne of the outfits I wore after I renounced my powers, my heritage ... before I realized who I really am."⁶³ Again robbed of her superpowers, Wonder Woman is forced to face physical trials meant to redeem her of "past sins" with only human skills. This poses a minimal challenge, but when she is reunited with her mother on Paradise Island she seems unsure of herself and her past selves [Figure. 16]. J. Bone reads this as a response from O'Neil to his critics, or to his own experiences with the character.⁶⁴ What this confusing final panel points to is that despite the intentions of the men and women who created her, Wonder Woman remains an uncertain, complicated icon, claimed by a legion of fans with widely disparate needs and expectations.



Figure 15: Dennis O'Neil (w) and J. Bone (a), "Savage Ritual," in DC Retroactive: Wonder Woman—The '70s 1 (September 2011): [7].



Figure 16: Dennis O'Neil (w) and J. Bone (a), "Savage Ritual," in DC Retroactive: Wonder Woman—The '70s 1 (September 2011): [25].

The most recent incarnation of the Wonder Woman series written by Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang still seems disconnected from the series' original political intent. The Wonder Woman character becomes a more justifiable icon if we look at her long history in the comic books themselves. My hope is that this account of the 1972 Women's Lib issue of *Wonder Woman* does more than just "set the record straight" and that it might illustrate how mainstream comic books have functioned as popular representations of gender and feminism, an area worthy of further investigation.

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NOTES

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