

STEFANIE LETHBRIDGE

Amazon Reboot: Wonder Woman, Classical Heritage and the Question of Hero Equality

Wonder Woman was born of conflict and born to resolve conflict. She was invented in 1941 by the Harvard lawyer and psychologist William Moulton Marston (using the pseudonym Charles Moulton) and set out to help America fight the Nazis.¹ And while the Nazis tried to resurrect an ancient mythology that would glorify their own brand of heroism, American popular culture invented a woman character who, along with Batman and Superman, was to form the trinity of DC's most long-lived superheroes. Unusually for her gender, Wonder Woman fought with brute force as well as with feminine charms and compassion. The superhero genre is traditionally a male-dominated world and female superheroes have had to fight not only against villains but also against gender and genre stereotypes. Toughness and femininity are not a standard combination in the Western cultural repertoire. If female superheroes appear at all, they tend to be the derivatives or »side-chicks« of male superheroes – like Batgirl, Supergirl or Spider-Woman.² In contrast, Wonder Woman has been a stand-alone female superhero since her inception, though in the course of her history she has teamed up with other (male and female) superheroes, notably in the Justice League where she tended to be the »token« female member in a predominantly male club. In addition to being in a gender minority, female superheroes find their powers more frequently called into question than their male counterparts and they are required to »demonstrat[e] their abilities or defend [...] their roles as heroes« more often.³ A perennial difficulty of female (super)heroes in their fight for equal status with male counterparts is the frequent hypersexualisation and objectification of these characters – so much so, that critics persistently claim the female superhero to be merely a male fantasy and thus inadequate as a representation of the ideals of gender equality.⁴ Accordingly, when the

¹ Wonder Woman first appeared as a nine-page feature in DC's *All Star Comics* #8 of December 1941, followed by her own title, *Sensation Comics* #1 in January 1942.

² CoCCA 2016, 1, computes 12 percent starring female characters in mainstream superhero comics in 2015.

³ O'Reilly 2005, 273.

⁴ See for example Wright 2001, 21: »there was a lot in these stories to suggest that Wonder Woman was not so much a pitch to ambitious girls as an object for male sexual fantasies and fetishes.« Stanley dilutes the claim to include both options: Strong women in popular

United Nations appointed Wonder Woman as honorary ambassador for female equality in October 2016, she lost that position again a few weeks later amidst protests against »using a character with an overtly sexualised image at a time when the headline news in United States and the world is the objectification of women and girls.«⁵

While a number of critics have explored Wonder Woman's qualities as female superhero,⁶ and others have outlined her origin in ancient myth,⁷ the two perspectives have rarely been combined. Despite the difficulties with gender norms that female superheroes encounter, Wonder Woman, this is my claim, represents a viable combination of femininity and the superhero. She derives this viability partly from her contextualisation in classical myth. The female superhero, as Wim Tigges claims, »differs in many respects from what characterizes the stereotypical woman,« but she also »distinguishes herself in subtle ways from the qualities generally found in the conventional male superhero.«⁸ This is not a development that came with the rise of feminism. The myth of Amazons has offered Western cultures a platform for the negotiation of gender norms connected to the memes of heroism for thousands of years. It is the familiarity and »sameness« of the Amazon's unfamiliar otherness, that, paradoxically, provides a safe space for the cultural disruptions the figure can cause.

A woman in many guises

Diana, princess of Themyscira, also known as Wonder Woman, was conceived as an Amazon who joins the American war effort. The Amazons of William Marston's universe live on a remote (and unmapped) island in a peaceful and exclusively female society. Like all superheroes, Wonder Woman has a costume, in her case with definite US-patriotic signals with a star-spangled skirt and a red top that features an eagle as breast piece.⁹

culture are »as much sexual fantasy as they are gendered inspiration, whether the fantasy involves submission or dominance« (2005, 171).

⁵ Ross 2016.

⁶ See, among others, Cocca 2016; Hanley 2014; Sandifer 2013; Stanley 2005.

⁷ Darowski and Rush 2014.

⁸ Tigges 2017, 129.

⁹ In fact, all the Amazons in Marston's version wear similarly skimpy outfits as they move around vaguely classical architecture – the idea was obviously to suggest a classical context. The costume is designed by Hippolyte, Wonder Woman's mother and queen of the Amazons.

Wonder Woman's alter-ego is Diana Prince who acts as a nurse and later as a secretary to Steve Trevor, member of the US military.

William Marston believed that a female domination of love would be able to control and direct masculine violence.

Woman's body contains twice as many love generating organs and endocrine mechanisms as the male. What women lack is the dominance or self assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way.¹⁰

The early numbers of *Sensation Comics* try to put the paradox of enforced love into practice, describing Wonder Woman as the one who comes »to save the world from the hatreds and wars of men in a man-made world!« and who »brings to America woman's eternal gifts – Love and Wisdom.«¹¹ The introduction to Marston's comic explicitly puts her on a par with Greek gods and heroes: »as lovely as Aphrodite – as wise as Athena – with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules.«¹² Wonder Woman's signature weapons are non-aggressive and not primarily destructive: her bullet-proof bracelets allow her to fend off attacks by firearms and her magic lasso forces anyone who is bound by it to speak the truth.¹³ As a consequence of Wonder Woman's main weapon, bondage scenes between men and women or between women are notably more frequent in Wonder Woman comics than in other mainstream superhero tales.¹⁴ Marston's penchant for kinky bondage scenarios has repeatedly been a target of criticism which tended to be uncomfortable with the BDSM associations this carries. It is, however, consistent with his notion that submission can have positive effects.

¹⁰ William Marston quoted in Daniels 2000, 22–23.

¹¹ Marston Jan. 1942 and Marston March 1942. For a detailed exploration of Marston's theoretical argument about the positive influence of the »domination of love« and the four »elementary unit responses« that function as social stimuli: dominance, compliance, submission and inducement, see Finn 2014, Lepore 2014, and Sandifer 2013, 39–53. Marston, in an interview, claimed that »Give [men] an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they'll be proud to become her willing slaves!« quoted in Sandifer 2013, 51.

¹² George Perez later adjusted Mercury to Hermes. Several story arcs present Diana's special abilities as explicit gifts from the gods, in others, including the most recent film version, Diana is Zeus' daughter and thus a half-god.

¹³ Initially, the lasso forces anyone bound by it to follow Wonder Woman's orders. It is later turned into the lasso of truth. Wonder Woman also owns an invisible plane, though this does not feature in the more recent comic or film versions.

¹⁴ Hanley 2014, 44–46.

»Wonder Woman was Marston's prototype for the female love leader« that he considered necessary »to bringing about a kinder, gentler civilization.«¹⁵ Though Marston's »ideas garnered little support,« as Sandifer remarks, their representation in the Wonder Woman comics »embedded his vast and mad worldview deep in the fabric of American popular culture.«¹⁶ In its broad outlines the history of Wonder Woman parallels the history of female superheroes more generally.¹⁷ During the 1940s, female superheroes tended to be strong, independent and clever, a view of women encouraged by women's contribution to the war effort (comic book Golden Age). The postwar era returned to softer, more feminised appearances of female heroes and Wonder Woman developed a strong interest in romance (Silver Age). The taming of Wonder Woman in the 1950s (along with other superheroes) was partly a response to increasing attacks on the comics industry. Among the most influential attackers was the psychologist Fredric Wertham, whose *Seduction of the Innocent* linked comics, juvenile delinquency and sexual practices outside heteronormative values. Wertham deplores Wonder Woman's particular brand of assertive femininity as »extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is plainly Lesbian.«¹⁸ By the early 1970s, Wonder Woman had lost her super powers as well as her costume and instead gained an elderly male tutor. However, in response to civil rights and feminist movements, the number of superheroines began to increase in the DC and Marvel universes and women regained some of their war-time strengths (Bronze Age). The successful ABC tv-show from 1975 onwards, starring Lynda Carter, took up liberal feminist ideals and was hailed as a significant change in the depiction of women on prime time television, as Carter herself points out: »There just weren't any lead roles like this for women. If you wanted to work, you had to play a hooker, a secretary or a mother.«¹⁹ Carter's Wonder Woman presents an apparently untroubled combination of gentle feminine reasoning and hard fists as she first lectures the villains and then knocks them out, reminiscent of Marston's Wonder Woman who happily felled Nazi spies with a »Nothing like a good right hook to settle an argument!«²⁰ Frequently rescuing Steve Trevor as »mansel in distress,« Carter's Wonder Woman presented a strong and yet caring character to a

¹⁵ Finn 2014, 8–9.

¹⁶ Sandifer 2013, 53.

¹⁷ The following summary relies mainly on Cocca 2016 and Sandifer 2013.

¹⁸ Wertham 1953, no pag.

¹⁹ Quoted in Mainon and Ursini 2006, 115.

²⁰ Marston Jan. 1942, 11.

mainstream television audience. The last decade of the twentieth century returned to a »sexualized and more violent depiction of female superheroes« partly as a backlash to third-wave feminism (Modern Age). This is the era of »Bad Girl« comic art and Wonder Woman appears in an ever smaller bikini and in the so-called »broke back pose,« an anatomically impossible position which displays both front and back of the ample curves of a woman at the same time. The early 2000s, after much protest from fans themselves, turned away from the excessive sexualisation of women, though the superhero genre remains a very body-focussed genre for both genders. As of the late twentieth century, the cinema has also made major contributions to the cultural presence of superheroes,²¹ though it was not until 2017 that Wonder Woman received her own film, directed by Patty Jenkins.

Thus, while Marston designed Wonder Woman according to his rather idiosyncratic notions of feminism, in the nearly 80 years of her existence she has been narrated, drawn and shaped by many different writers, artists and editors with radically different outlooks: From Robert Kanigher's use of violence to maintain an American status quo in the 1950s and 60s to Gail Simone's women's lib focus in the late noughties, from the sexualisation of the »porn« Wonder Woman of William Messner-Loebs and Mike Deodato in the 1990s to Greg Rucka's attempt to locate Wonder Woman in current political debates about equality, diversity and non-violent conflict resolution. Wonder Woman is, and has been, many things to many people: »Over time, somewhat cynically, Wonder Woman has both reinforced traditional ideas about women as well as creating space for more fluid gender possibilities. Sometimes both have occurred at the same time.«²²

In 1985 DC staged a major reboot with the DC universe-wide »Crisis on Infinite Earths« (12-part mini-series). This erased the story lines of the various fictional universes and brought all characters back in line in a single universe. At that point in time, Wonder Woman was DC's worst-selling title.²³ A post-Crisis Wonder Woman emerged from 1986 onwards with George Perez as new author. Perez (re-)connected central ideas from the Marston era to a classical context, developing Wonder Woman's Amazon background and introducing the Greek pantheon as major component of the story arc. After Perez, the connections to Greek myth were explored most

²¹ In 2016 »there were over 25 tv shows on air or in development, and over 50 films set to star comics-based superhero characters« (Cocca 2016, 1).

²² Ibid., 26

²³ Hanley 2014, 228.

thoroughly by those writers who also pushed the liberal feminist potential of the character. The following discussion will examine recurring motifs in the comics' engagement with the classical context, rather than a chronological description of the role of the classics across all the manifestations of Wonder Woman since the 1940s.

Expanding the formula

Popular culture products are largely formula products; they reproduce the familiar with variations. That is both their appeal and their weakness. The constant repetition of specific and always more or less similar character types and plot constellations is what gives popular culture products such an influence on cultural preconceptions. This is also why critical discussions on popular culture artefacts are so preoccupied with questions of representation: if products designed for the mass market offer only one type of hero, say, a young, physically fit, male, white heterosexual, then other types of hero, say, old, disabled, female, non-white or homosexual, find it almost impossible to be accepted as hero; there is no ready-made slot for them in the cultural imaginary. »Marginalized groups have been forced to »cross-identify« with those different from them while dominant groups have not.«²⁴

Generally, classical myths offer ready-made characters and character constellations that enable comics writers to incorporate multi-layered meanings without diverging from the basic formula framework. This is particularly interesting in the case of heroes, as classical myth offers a large number of well-established models. Heracles served as inspiration for Superman and practically all superheroes have occasional sojourns in the classical world, usually in the shape of time travel.²⁵ In contrast, Wonder Woman is fundamentally located in mythology. Externally, this influenced her costume, which not only sports US-American symbolism, but also signals vaguely classical associations: Amazons on fifth-century representations, for instance, also wear short pleated skirts and tops with bare shoulders (in some cases with a bare breast).²⁶ The classical architecture on Wonder Woman's native island, Themyscira, and her preferred expletives, like »Suffering Sappho!« or

²⁴ Cocca 2106, 3.

²⁵ Kovacs 2011, 3.

²⁶ See, among many, Stewart 1995, 583, Fig. 4 »Amazonomachy from an Attic red-figure volute crater,« Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York or 593, Fig. 9, »Roman marble copy of a group from the shield of Pheidias's statue of Athena Parthenos.«

»Great Hera!« add further classical connections. These would be instances of what George Kovacs describes as »cosmetic borrowings,«²⁷ used as ornament in order to add classical flavour to a narrative.

For Marston, »intending a powerful and independent female hero figure, the Amazon legends of ancient Greece provided a convenient shorthand« for more complex developments of both character and plot. Going beyond »cosmetic« allusions, writers since the 1986 reboot turned Wonder Woman's Amazon heritage »into a serious, even defining component of [her] psychological profile.«²⁸ Assuming the role of an already established figure in our cultural repertoire, Wonder Woman convincingly combines her status as a warrior with her status as a woman. In line with classical representations of Amazon warriors embedded in a community of other female warriors, Wonder Woman's character is located in an equal balance between combativeness and companionship. »Amazons are taught to channel their fear into battle rage,« Hippolyta explains to her daughter when Diana is worried about losing herself in her anger about the violent actions of villains in Meredith Finch's story arc »War-torn.«²⁹ In the same sequence, Diana defines the nature of an Amazon to the wrathful Donna Troy who is trying to kill her: »An Amazon looks for ways to empower her sisters ... because *their* strength is hers,« and »At the heart of Amazon culture ... there is only one word that defines who and what we are ... sister.«³⁰ While it is Superman who stops Diana from murdering the perpetrator of a mass killing, Diana tries to overcome the hostility of Donna Troy by offering her a chance to reform. Wonder Woman's firm connection to various groups (the Justice League, her Amazon sisters, her patchwork family in Man's World) locate her ferocity in a context of care for the well-being of the group. The combination of ferocity with care is in Western cultures often reduced to the figure of the mother who fiercely defends her young. The Amazon background allows a broader application of this combination of ferocity and compassion, as Amazons offer a form of femininity that is not primarily defined through motherhood.

Classical contexts provide not only Wonder Woman herself, but also her opponents with more complex dimensions. When Circe brings the Medusa back to life in Greg Rucka's sequence »Stoned,« these two villains come with a ready-made background which only needs a little modernisation – largely

²⁷ Kovacs 2011, 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Finch April 2005, no pag.

³⁰ Ibid., emphasis and ellipses in the original.

through language and costume – with Circe and the Gorgons kitted out in »Bad Girl« style tight-fitting leather, low cleavage and heavy make-up. Further, the classical background provides added opportunity for visual encoding: An owl who listens in at the conference between Circe and the Gorgon sisters can be identified as Athena’s spy if the reader decodes the classical allusion. Ridiculing otherwise intimidating characters of the classical canon is also good for an occasional joke: In an amusing moment of weakness, the Medusa, after 3000 years of absence, finds herself completely unable to deal with the crowds and car-fumes of modern America. All of these strategies – background story, additional visual encoding and moments of shock when the classical character encounters modern life – add dimensions to the story that do not need to be spelled out in detail, because they can be imported via the background myth.

In terms of representation, the activated context of Greek myth enables Wonder Woman to slip into pre-fabricated hero-roles, such as that of Perseus, when she defeats the Medusa,³¹ or Heracles, whose place she offers to take as he is struggling to hold up, not the heavens, but Themyscira, the island home of the Amazons, that is threatening to collapse over the Cave of Doom.³² The narrative thus features a female hero filling the role of a (recognised and recognisable) male hero of classical myth. Such »displacement of classical models,« as Kovacs terms the procedure »in which popular story motifs, settings, and characters are appropriated to new and improbable environments,«³³ actively engages with and reinterprets the classical pre-text. The displacement, even reversal, of classical parameters highlights the adjustments that are made to the classical model: A female hero is shown as adequate replacement of the male hero. In contrast to Perseus, who uses a mirror, Diana defeats the Medusa by blinding herself. Her victory comes at a much higher (physical and emotional) cost to her person. The narrative does not account this as weakness. In the end, it is this heroism of self-sacrifice that is rewarded when Athena restores Diana’s eyesight after a period of blindness.³⁴ The classical background highlights both the equality of male and female superhero and the »subtle« differences, as Tigges has it, between them.

³¹ In Rucka 2004–2005, no pag.

³² In Perez and Wein March 1988, 4.

³³ Kovacs 2011, 16.

³⁴ In Rucka June–July 2005. The parallel between Diana and Perseus is made clear even to those comics readers who are not well versed in classical myth, because the Perseus story is told intradiegetically to the two children of Diana’s assistant.

Most of all, the classical allusions provide opportunities for allegory: War or conflict, personified through Ares, is Wonder Woman's constant opponent. In the 2017 movie, the God of War turns out to be disguised as the innocuous-looking administrator of the secret service, whose machinations actually produce rather than prevent the armed conflict. This momentarily disconnects Ares from standard representations as oversized and heavily armed warrior with smoke oozing out of his helmet (the preferred representation in the Perez run for instance, and the one the film draws on for the final battle). Instead, it reveals the perniciousness of a system that in the end benefits from war and that uses the grand gestures of the individual hero only to distract from its own villainy. In Rucka's presentation of Ares as attractive and smooth manipulator of minds, Ares explains his role as the other side of the hero and the precondition for change – literalised in a mirror through which he guides Diana in order to show her his point of view. While Wonder Woman has convinced Ares that to encourage mankind to destroy itself completely in war would also be destructive for Ares, because a god needs worshippers,³⁵ Ares here turns this argument against Wonder Woman and indicates that peace also needs its opposite: »Peace brings nothing but stagnation. [...] You cannot have peace without conflict.«³⁶ In effect, he argues that heroes depend on crisis. The fact that the lettering in the panel where Ares moves through the mirror is backwards and the extreme chaos and fragmentation of the following two double-spread pages suggest, however, that Ares distorts reality. His mirror view, to put it in Lacanian terms, reveals not so much the »real« but the contradictions of the symbolic. The context of the classical myth invests the rather formulaic conflict between an idealistic young woman and a manipulating older man – which is endlessly repeated in the history of comics – with the allegorical significance of a fight between love of conflict and love of peace. The connection between heroism and war is in this framework not rejected completely. The potential similarity between Ares and the Amazon is brought to a head in the *New 52* series by Brian Azzarello and Meredith Finch, when Wonder Woman is trained by Ares and eventually replaces him as God of War.³⁷ Beyond the advantages of expanding the impact of well-known formulae, the contextualisation in classical myth also provides a framework in which to investigate the role of the female superhero.

³⁵ This is the focus of the argument in the Perez run.

³⁶ Rucka Feb. 2004.

³⁷ In classical myth, Amazons are sometimes presented as the daughters of Ares.

Classics and the female superhero

It is worth noting that scholars discuss female action heroes and ancient Amazons in near-identical terms. With monotonous predictability critics reach the conclusion that the narratives of these masculinised women are sites to disrupt traditional gender binaries. As Jeffrey A. Brown points out, the action heroine »does muddy the waters of what we consider masculine and feminine, of desirable beauty and threatening sexuality, of subjectivity and objectivity, of powerful and powerless.«³⁸ Carolyn Cocca affirms the »hybridization of conventional gender roles« through the female superhero.³⁹ For the ancient myth, Andrew Stewart concludes that Amazons »challenge the cultural stereotype of a docile femininity« and »the sacred principle of male supremacy.«⁴⁰ Ruby Blondell describes Amazons (both in ancient myth and in their manifestation on the contemporary screen) as »radically alien in virtue of their rejection of conventional gender norms.«⁴¹ Apart from their similar disruptive potential, both ancient and modern warrior women apparently repay commercial exploitation: Stewart remarks on the marked increase of Amazon representations on vases of the Periclean period; Cocca indicates the commercial gain to be reaped from empowered superwomen.⁴² The figure of the Amazon has (and had) a wide and diverse audience appeal »from bad movies to the radical lesbian feminist separatism of the 1970s,« from gay parades to the name of the local basketball team and a term of abuse in domestic disagreements.⁴³ They remain a site on which to project utopian visions of female strength as well as nightmares of social disorder. In classical sources and their adaptations Amazons figure as admired or rejected, and finally as domesticated »other« to the Greek polis. Three motifs dominate the use and re-use of Amazons as literary trope: their similarity to men in courage and prowess, the need to domesticate them to protect patriarchal social articulations, and a focus on their physical (that is to say sexual) attractions. In its many manifestations the Amazon myth dramatises »an inappropriate relationship between sexed bodies and gendered acts.«⁴⁴ On the one hand their military prowess makes them a worthy opponent. »The

³⁸ Brown 2011, 10.

³⁹ Cocca 2016, 155.

⁴⁰ Stewart 1995, 584, 594.

⁴¹ Blondell 2005, 189.

⁴² Stewart 1995, 586; Cocca 2016, 1.

⁴³ Schwarz 2000, xi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

status of the winner was enhanced by merit in the defeated,« for instance in Plutarch's description of the Amazon's attack on Athens after Theseus' abduction of their queen.⁴⁵ Defeating the Amazons proclaims the superiority of the Greeks: »To win an Amazon, either through arms or through love or, even better, through both, is to be certified as a hero.«⁴⁶ While praising the valour of the Amazon attackers, Plutarch also stresses the (sexual) loyalty of the abducted Amazon queen once she has been won by Theseus.⁴⁷ The domestication and feminisation of the gender transgressive Amazon continued to appeal in later re-workings of the theme. In Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613), for instance, the Amazon queen Hippolyta is reminded how she was »near to make the male / To thy sex captive« had not Theseus »shrunk thee into / The bound thou wast o'erflowing, at once subduing / Thy force and thy affection.«⁴⁸ Theseus manages to domesticate Hippolyta and this rescues her from behaviour that is considered inappropriate for her sex. In other versions of the myth, Amazon customs continue as untamed other, for instance in their rejection of womanly occupations, as described in Herodotus. Despite their refusal to adopt certain aspects of socially defined femininity, they remain attractive as women. According to Herodotus, the young Scythians stay with their Amazon partners even though the Amazons »kept to their old ways, riding to the hunt on horseback sometimes with, sometimes without their menfolk, taking part in war and wearing the same sort of clothes as men.«⁴⁹ In their various mutations as superior but subdued and domesticated foe or as (sexually) attractive and equal partner, Amazons combine the familiar with the strange, that which can be integrated and that which remains outside, they are »at once undiscovered and already known.«⁵⁰ Significantly, Amazons are the outsiders that come extremely close: they figure as invaders of the state or the home (as soldiers, queens and wives) and thus their difference represents a source of disturbance for established social articulations. In this proximity, Wonder Woman, read against the background of classical myth, offers a rearrangement of the parameters of male heroic discourse.

45 Hardwick 1990, 32.

46 Kleinbaum 1983, 1.

47 Hardwick 1990, 21.

48 Shakespeare and Fletcher 2015, 1.1.80–81, 83–85.

49 Herodotus 1972, 308.

50 Schwarz 2000, 22.

Rewritten heroism

The Amazons' potential for disturbance has been attractive, among others, for feminists. In some feminist positions, Amazons were hailed as an original matriarchy, a form of social organisation that circumvents, and possibly heals, the injustices of patriarchy.⁵¹ This was based on the observations of J.J. Bachofen who, in 1861, explored the Amazon myth as a leftover of prehistoric matriarchy. While Bachofen acknowledged some positive sides of matriarchy, »his verdict upon it was unequivocal: when women rule, the spirit remains earthbound.«⁵² He located the advance of civilisation in a liberation from nature: »The triumph of patriarchy brings with it the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature.«⁵³ With a positive reevaluation of matriarchy in second-wave feminism, Wonder Woman – after her domestication in the 1950s and 60s – was able to return as a feminist icon. In 1972, Gertrude Steinem adopted Wonder Woman as cover girl for the liberal feminist magazine *Ms* and the Amazons came to signify the powers of matriarchy.⁵⁴ The more earthbound, less alienated state of Amazon society is presented not only in the harmonious sisterhood of the Amazons' home on Themyscira, but also in the strong link to Gaea, the mother earth goddess who, in the Perez storyline, is the life-giver of Amazons who recreated all women that have been abused and killed by men as Amazons.⁵⁵ This connection between women and earth, popularised as a feature of feminism, enabled a reshuffling of the parameters of classical myth: In the eleventh labour Heracles has to fight the giant Antaeus, son of Gaea and Poseidon, who attacks him on his way to the Garden of Hesperides. Antaeus derives his strength from his connection with his mother Earth and Heracles is unable to defeat him until he lifts him off the ground and breaks this connection.⁵⁶ Though depicted as the enemy of the hero Heracles – and thus by implication as villain – Antaeus has served variously as identification point for those who have been marginalised by dominating narratives of civilisation. Seamus Heaney, for instance, in his birthday speech of 13th April 2009, explains how as a young Irish poet he identified with Antaeus

⁵¹ See Hanley 2014, 204–6.

⁵² Stewart 1995, 572.

⁵³ J.J. Bachofen (1861) quoted in Stewart 1995, 572.

⁵⁴ See Hanley 2014, 205–6. Steinem also published a Wonder Woman story collection in 1972.

⁵⁵ Perez and Potter Feb. 1987, 8–9.

⁵⁶ I thank Hans-Peter Nill for drawing my attention to this parallel.

»because I saw myself as something of an earthman.« In his poem »Antaeus,« Heaney articulates the dangers that follow upon a loss of groundedness; for Antaeus his »elevation« represents his »fall«. ⁵⁷

In Greek myth, Heracles not only subdues the primitive force of the earthman, he also figures as tamer (and violator) of the Amazons when, in the ninth labour, he steals Hippolyta's girdle. In an inversion of Heracles' defeat of the earth-bound Antaeus, Wonder Woman's first major intervention in human affairs in the story arc presented by Perez, is her battle with the monster Decay which has been sent by Ares' son Phobos to terrorise New York. Wonder Woman defeats Decay by binding the monster with her lasso, which has been forged from the girdle that Gaea gave to the Amazons. ⁵⁸ As Diana explains to the raging Decay: »It is the gift of the Lasso itself, Monster, to be constantly renewed, even as Gaea renews the Earth! It is the one enchantment over which you have no power!« ⁵⁹ And while the connection to earth defeats the monster sent by Phobos, Poseidon heals Wonder Woman's wounds after her battle with Ares himself. ⁶⁰ Thus, both parents of the supposedly monstrous Antaeus empower the heroic Amazon to defeat a threat originating from Ares. Not incidentally, this also rescues the entire pantheon from oblivion. In a holistic version of the connection between humans, gods and nature, Diana thus becomes the link that keeps them all alive. The setup reverses the division (from earth) that Heracles created to achieve his victory. And Heracles himself, in Perez's *Wonder Woman*, is eventually released from the Cave of Doom by the courageous actions of Hippolyta and by the Amazons' willingness to forgive his previous violation of their trust, when he and his men imprisoned and raped the Amazons in order to steal the girdle. Heracles learnt his lesson:

In a world of ignorance and belligerence, I stood tall ... as I believed was my right as a man! I could not admit that the Amazons were not preaching domination over man but rather equal merit [...]! I betrayed ye – and that is unforgivable! Nonetheless, I do now beg your forgiveness! ⁶¹

The patriarchal and divisive hero is rescued by the loving forgiveness of the earthbound Amazons and redeems himself by submitting to love – in

⁵⁷ Heaney 1975, 12.

⁵⁸ It is, in fact, Antiope's girdle, since Heracles has stolen the one belonging to Hippolyta.

⁵⁹ Perez and Wein May 1987, 12.

⁶⁰ Perez and Wein Aug. 1987, 6.

⁶¹ Perez and Wein March 1988, 8.

line with Marston's ideals. Significantly, Wonder Woman is neither cast as a new version of Antaeus, empowered by her link to earth, nor as the new Heracles, but as an agent in-between the two: positioned *between* a patriarchal and a matriarchal society, she brings the two together and restores balance because she is connected to both worlds. While the »double gesture« of femininity/feminism and masculine assertiveness »exploits in-between spaces in an attempt to undermine totalizing dichotomies.« as Stephanie Genz phrases it,⁶² Wonder Woman is more than in-between feminine and masculine; the classical framework also places her between human and god and between ancient and modern. Notably, this does not primarily give her greater power but greater powers of understanding. As Ares points out (in a story by Rucka): »You are the only mortal who can begin to grasp these things, Diana, only you, with feet so firmly planted in the divine and in the mundane, can begin to understand what has happened here.«⁶³ In Jenkins' film version, Diana claims the role of link for all Amazons: »We are the bridge to a greater understanding between all men« (0:30:15). Wonder Woman thus functions as a hero of connectedness and understanding rather than division and conquest. No longer only the testing case for male heroism, the heroic Amazon recruits classical heroes for her cause: Achilles for instance, instead of killing the Amazon, joins in her fight.⁶⁴ The support of Achilles also illustrates Wonder Woman's own dependencies. When, in the recent *DC Universe Rebirth* series, Wonder Woman suffers from a severe personality disorder because she starts to doubt her own origins, it is the care of her friends that bring her back to herself.⁶⁵ While she rescues others, others rescue her; she operates in the kind of vertical network structures (as opposed to hierarchies) that Jonatan Steller has described as a new »relational agency« for heroic action in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.⁶⁶

Domestication and sexualisation

Wonder Woman derives her heroic potential from the fact that she is both insider and outsider of Western society, both contemporary and a messenger from the past. As an outsider, Diana Prince, the Wonder Woman, »comments

⁶² Genz 2009, 155.

⁶³ Rucka Feb. 2004, no pag.

⁶⁴ Technically, Achilles is still fighting Amazons: the rogue Amazons from space, Simone 2010, no pag.

⁶⁵ See especially Rucka 2017.

⁶⁶ Steller 2017, 41–42.

on norms about gender that Americans take for granted.«⁶⁷ This is acted out in her surprise at behavioural codes imposed on women in »Man's World«. It begins with her dress. Marston initially designed her costume as »athletic and functional.«⁶⁸ He positioned the revealing nature of Wonder Woman's costume as an act of protest. More conservative women denounce her as »Hussy!« because »She has no clothes on!« and it is made clear to her that the dean of Holliday College, where Wonder Woman's friend Etta Candy is studying, will not allow her to wear such revealing clothes, »She insists on more above the waist!«⁶⁹ Wonder Woman is forced to adopt the more accepted external guises – and the more restrictive clothing – of nurse and secretary, in order to be accepted in Man's World. Marston stresses Wonder Woman's relief, every time she can change back into her less restrictive costume and »be herself.« Marston also celebrates the athletic fitness of the Holliday girls, who furnish Wonder Woman's backup army. At the same time, he positions the chocolate-devoted Etta Candy, who clearly does not conform to the athletic body type, as their irrepressible leader. Marston presents women who display their own body because they want to do so. These girls enjoy the power they have over men: »If they're men, we can catch them!« they triumph, as they march against the Nazis.⁷⁰

The presentation of, however empowered, half-naked female bodies by a male pen inevitably meets with the accusation that such an empowerment merely feeds male fantasies. It is a fact that Wonder Woman has been narrated and drawn in the majority by male artists.⁷¹ As Kathryn Schwarz has remarked, however, the assumption that male-authored texts cannot produce enabling representations of women is puzzling »in a critical climate both wary of intentionality and dismayed by essentialism.«⁷² While it is important that women have a say in the way they are represented, to discount the possibility that men can also present ideas in favour of gender equality seems too

67 Cocca 2016, 27.

68 Finn 2014, 12.

69 Marston Feb. 1942, 9.

70 Ibid.

71 Marston's wife Elizabeth and his mistress Olive Byrne are said to have contributed to the design of Wonder Woman's character (Sandifer 2013, 45). Regular female writers and artists came fairly late to Wonder Woman. Joye Murchison, as Marston's assistant, scripted a number of Wonder Woman stories between 1945 and 1947. The first woman artist was Trina Robbins, who drew and co-wrote the *Legend of Wonder Woman* mini-series of 1986. The first regular woman writer for the main series was Gail Simone in the 1990s. See Cronin 2017.

72 Schwarz 2000, 43.

reliant on the positions of second-wave feminism. In contrast, the pride in their female bodies align Wonder Woman and her girl troops with 1990s postfeminist »Girl Power« positions, »a rebellion against the false impression that since women don't want to be sexually exploited, they don't want to be sexual.«⁷³ The point of Marston's Wonder Woman – shared by later writers of different genders or sexual orientations – is that the choice what to do with her body, and how to dress, should be the woman's. When in Matt Wagner's mini-series *Trinity*, Batman comments on Wonder Woman's battle dress: »Aren't you a bit underdressed for all this?«, Wonder Woman retorts: »And why are you wearing a mask while you terrorize this man? Ashamed to show your face?«⁷⁴ She rejects his right to dictate her dress choices. The recent cinematic representation of Wonder Woman by Gal Gadot as actress and Patty Jenkins as director stresses the point that Diana can be as little fitted into preconceived roles as into traditional outfits: »How can a woman possibly fight in this?« Diana asks (0:47:50), as she is trying on so-called appropriate women's clothing. She is puzzled by a dress code which seems to prevent the normal occupation of a woman, which is to fight. On the other hand, the locals in Man's World, British in this case, struggle to comprehend that a woman can exist outside of standard social norms: Steve Trevor presents Diana in an acknowledged position of inferiority, as his secretary, though she quickly turns out to be considerably more knowledgeable in foreign languages and more efficient in combat than any of the men present. As Diana is slotted into preconceived roles which she clearly does not fit, she breaks up gender binaries, as critics have noted. Important here is that she does not simply take on a masculine role. She adopts aspects of behaviour that in Man's World are connoted with masculinity, but she retains feminine markers, for instance her body type or her (skimpy) battle dress which she has chosen herself. This combination is almost inevitably read within sexualised parameters by her (male) surroundings. The reaction of Trevor's friend Sameer, when he sees Diana knock out an obstreperous drunk, caricatures this stereotypical response to a combative woman: »I am both frightened and aroused!« (1:01:20) Diana's oblivion to standard categorisations in Man's World (she does not know what a secretary is and describes it as slavery when it is explained to her, she declares that men are unnecessary for »the pleasures of the flesh,« and she takes female combativeness for granted) enables her to query not only assumptions

⁷³ Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 137.

⁷⁴ Wagner 2004, 81.

about femininity, but also about superheroes who are routinely aligned with masculine powers.

Talking about Amazons, as was established above, inevitably involves talking about (sexually charged) bodies. The disjunction of »sexed bodies and gendered acts«⁷⁵ lies at the very heart of the Amazon myth and fuels the potential of Marston's character to question the masculine connotations of the superhero. But instead of reproducing a narrative of heroic dominance, Wonder Woman accepts the mutual dependencies of networks. Significantly, Diana derives her final surge of strength in the battle against Ares when she recognises and accepts her own submission to Steve Trevor's love. As she witnesses Steve sacrifice his own life when he blows up the plane which contains the fatal poison gas, she bursts free of the shackles that Ares used to bind her. The decision to kill off Steve Trevor in the movie is an unusual one (in the comics, he stays alive in various manifestations as Diana's boss, colleague, friend, lover or Etta Candy's husband) and could be read as a reversal of the much discussed »Women in Refrigerators« topos: the fact that a disproportionate number of women in superhero tales are injured or killed »to create emotional turmoil in the narrative of a male character.«⁷⁶ In contrast, in Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* Steve's death enables the final plot twist and Diana's victory. Her voice-over echoes Steve's beliefs and confirms her submission to the powers of love – not only to personal love, but a love for humanity: »It's not about what you deserve, it's about what you believe. And I believe in love!« (2:00:15)

The stranger that is part of us

Wonder Woman is in a position to question the norms of a patriarchal world because as an Amazon she is a recognisable outsider. Western culture recognises her otherness and thus, even in her strangeness – as independent woman, as superior warrior, as female superhero – she is familiar. This combination of familiar and strange is made secure by her location in the frameworks of classical myth. I want to briefly illustrate this with two examples. In *Hiketeia*, a graphic novel by Greg Rucka (2002), Danielle, a young girl who has committed a series of revenge murders, asks Wonder Woman for protection using the ancient ritual of supplication, *hiketeia*. The classical con-

⁷⁵ Schwarz 2000, 3.

⁷⁶ Hanley 2014, 238.

text for this is clearly flagged: classical statues frame the panels that show Danielle's supplication and in the first pages of the novel Diana has been looking up the conditions of the ritual, explaining it to the reader as she did so. While Diana is still musing on the fact that the furies no longer haunt the modern world, they appear outside her house, signalling the continued relevance of the classical framework. Accepting Danielle as her supplicant puts Wonder Woman under obligation to the ancient custom and causes a confrontation with Batman who wants to hand Danielle over to the law. Wonder Woman rejects Batman, first verbally as she refuses him entry to her house, then physically as she knocks him off her balcony, and in the end ritually: Batman tries to use the supplication ritual himself, petitioning for her protection: »I use [the ritual] as your ancestors did,« he claims, »I use it like Lykaon and Achilles.« But Diana refuses him, pointing out that he should have read his *Ilias* more carefully: »Achilles refused Lykaon. Just as I refuse you.«⁷⁷

The supplication ritual recalls the bondage theme that is characteristic of Wonder Woman, but places it in a classical context. It connects her with a tradition that used different methods than the modern Western world to respond to violent actions. The story positions her as a strong protectress (not an exclusively feminine trait in the superhero world, but one that is easy to associate with femininity) who uses violence if necessary. Both Wonder Woman and Batman submit rigorously to the requirements of their respective laws: »We are slaves to the law.«⁷⁸ Diana's bond to the ancient ritual pits her against our currently accepted system of justice represented by Batman. The perspective of the story, however, positions the reader on Diana's side, it makes the strange familiar. This is done not so much by trying to make the reader believe in the ritual as a viable alternative to modern justice. Instead, the story of the young Danielle who avenges the abuse, enslavement and death of her sister Melody by ruthless drug dealers, evokes pity and sympathy. While it is clear that Diana protects Danielle for the sake of the ritual and not out of compassion – she insists that she does not need to hear Danielle's story – the readers' emotional responses are likely to be influenced in favour of Danielle's desperate struggle for restitution. Danielle's eventual suicide relieves both Wonder Woman and the reader from the difficulty of a final decision against modern law. Significantly, as C.W. Marshall points out, Rucka's novel introduces »human choice as a required component for

⁷⁷ Rucka 2002, no pag.

⁷⁸ Marshall 2011, 101.

the completion of the ritual – the bond does not exist if it is not accepted«, and this »authorizes the shift from the supplicant to the supplicated« that the story presents. The furies do not pursue the one who has committed the crime but the one who fails to keep to the terms of *hiketeia* which stresses the social obligation connected to the ritual.⁷⁹ Diana, once again becomes the superhero who honours a bond – here the bond of the ritual. The voluntary submission and control implied in *hiketeia* contrasts the objectification and physical control that Melody is subjected to by the drug dealers.⁸⁰

In another story arc, also by Greg Rucka (2003), Diana publishes a series of essays on her ideas of how society should be run on the basis of equality and individual freedom. Her publisher initially tries to slot her into familiar frameworks of sexualisation by designing a cover that presents her as seductive and scantily clad female.⁸¹ Instead, Diana demands a picture of her lasso of truth as cover design. The book becomes a bestseller – even the gods on Olympus read it avidly – but it also evokes strong reactions against »all that stuff [...] about women and equality and sexuality and blaming people for the state of the world.« Diana’s detractors are quick to identify her as an Amazon and therefore alien who »promotes paganism, a disrespect of authority, [and] flies in the face of core family values.«⁸² When it is pointed out to them that with this position the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* should also be pulled from the shelves, the leader of Diana’s opponents displaces the dispute about alien influence onto a question of gender hierarchy and demands that Diana should remember her place as a woman.⁸³

As the discussion veers from an argument about socio-political positions of right and left to a moral argument about right and wrong, Diana the Amazon is presented as an agent of change and a forceful defender of equality. The classical context she can draw on helps to profile her position: Parallel to the plotline around Diana’s book, Athena is leading a revolt to replace Zeus on Olympus with Wonder Woman as her champion. Zeus tries to control Athena with the same argument used by Diana’s detractors, that she should mind her place as a woman. In the end, Athena (temporarily) gains the throne on Olympus (with the support of Ares, who is thus again the agent of change) and Zeus admits that his system of ruling without

⁷⁹ Ibid., 98 and 101.

⁸⁰ Sandifer 2013, 217.

⁸¹ Rucka Oct. 2003, no pag.

⁸² Rucka Jan. 2004, no pag.

⁸³ Ibid.

mercy is outdated.⁸⁴ Significantly, Wonder Woman gains victory over Zeus' champion with the head of the Medusa, once again stepping into the shoes of the hero Perseus, but unlike him, fighting for a woman's rule and the principle of mercy.

Conclusion

Efforts to invest female heroism with more compassion than the male version have been dismissed as reinforcing »Victorian« gender norms.⁸⁵ This position produces a circular – and therefore invalid – argument that makes it impossible for women to join the male-dominated club of heroes: If they are presented as identical to men in body, attitude and effectiveness, they simply reproduce masculinities in the »wrong« body. If they are invested with »feminine« qualities, they are said, either to merely fulfil male fantasies of powerful and therefore sexually arousing women or to reinforce old-fashioned gender stereotypes because their attitude does not reproduce the male one. Whatever choice the female hero makes, it is used to confirm the impossibility of a female hero; women are excluded *a priori*.

Against these odds, Wonder Woman has established an accepted and therefore viable combination of femininity and (super)heroism. Certain manifestations of the Wonder Woman character have been able to speak for and to feminist concerns to the extent that Wonder Woman became a (debated) feminist icon. Marston, whatever the sexual undertones of the bondage scenes, created a visual link to first-wave feminist campaigns of the early twentieth century which used chains and shackles to illustrate how women were bound by patriarchal rule,⁸⁶ and second-wave feminists celebrated Wonder Woman as an embodiment of matriarchal power. Since the DC-reboot in the mid-80s, several writers have presented liberal feminist ideas in connection with classical myth. The combination of the two discourses creates a discursive space that not only puts forward a feasible *combination* of stereotypically masculine and feminine features in the Amazon superhero, it also provides a safe space for the discussion of ideas that might be seen to threaten existing hierarchies: We *know* that superheroes can test the impossible and we *know* that Amazons are outsiders to our world. On the other hand, the very familiarity of the Amazon's otherness reduces her effectiveness in

⁸⁴ Rucka April 2003, no pag.

⁸⁵ Wright 2001, 21.

⁸⁶ Lepore 2014, 56, 85, 100–101.

destabilising norms. The disruption she causes has already been accommodated. Though she remains the exception to the norm, her position between the feminine and the masculine as female superhero articulates a possible combination and makes it familiar in the cultural imaginary.⁸⁷ With this she offers a vision. Seamus Heaney, who had identified with the earthbound Antaeus, also venerated the force represented by »sky-born« Heracles, »the lift of the heart when I'd lift my eyes to the heavens.« Heaney eventually chose a place »in between« the earth and the sky, the north and the south, the destruction and the imaginative renewal that is so bound up with Ireland: »We should keep our feet on the ground to signify that nothing is beneath us, but we should also lift up our eyes to say nothing is beyond us.«⁸⁸ Wonder Woman gives us a similar lead.

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⁸⁷ It is worth noting that Carol Danvers aka Captain Marvel, to date probably the most convincing and most powerful female superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Captain Marvel, 2019, dir. by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), appeared on the big screen after Jenkins' Wonder Woman. Captain Marvel is neither overtly sexualised, nor does she draw her emotional support from a romantic involvement with a man. In that sense, she takes a step further than Wonder Woman on the road to »hero equality«.

⁸⁸ Heaney 2009.

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