

Suffering Sappho! Female Friendships in Superhero Comics, 1940s to 1960s and Today

INTRODUCTION: SUPER WOMEN STAND ALONE

When Wonder Woman finds herself chained to a wall in an arch villain's lair or rushing to save her boyfriend from the clutches of Nazi spies, she often evokes the help of ancient women in bold comic sans letters. She shouts, "Great Athena!" to the Greek goddess of war when she sees the lair of the evil Multi-face. When a giant metal disk threatens to crush her, she calls out, "Merciful Minerva!" to the Roman goddess of wisdom. And when she runs to save innocent civilians from a boat engulfed in flames, she asks the help of "Suffering Sappho!" the ancient female poet who wrote of women professing affection for other women (*The Brave and the Bold* #63).

Wonder Woman understands that without the aid and comradeship of other women, she—who was born on an island of women and flanked at all times by female allies—would not only be unable to fight crime as effectively as she does but would have no reason to exist. At the dawn of superhero comics in the 1940s, Wonder Woman was one of the very few heroines to demonstrate that these relationships were essential to personal development. The majority of other women in superhero comics had no such connections, and the personal toll was clear; while Wonder Woman and her female armies have remained in the minds of Americans since 1941, it is difficult to name another superheroine who has achieved iconic status to rival the Batmans, Supermans, and Spidermans of popular comic fame. She resonates so clearly through the decades because she embodies a vital reality of women's lives often overlooked or belittled in all

forms of popular storytelling: female friends.

Having other women for friends may seem only a small part of a heroine's character—not nearly as important as her personality or her moral fiber, how cool her superpowers are or how well she is respected by male allies. But the most important gauge of a character's real quality and equality is her relationships to other women: specifically healthy friendships instead of stereotypical petty jealousies and two-faced catfights. Rind writes in *Women's Best*

Friendships: Beyond Betty, Veronica, Thelma, and Louise:

Contrary to the popular notion that women's talk primarily involves "gossiping" and "yakking," a friend's ability to listen in a noncritical fashion has been found to bolster self-esteem and self-worth. Furthermore, friendship often enhances women's sense of autonomy and individuality. (1)

Goodman and O'Brien agree, writing, "Friends are granted private access to the center of women's hearts; they see the pieces that don't quite fit or are hidden from view. Those parts of the self make us push out against narrow confines of family roles toward a wider world" (72). If lasting friendships bolster real women's confidence and autonomy, it stands to reason that the strongest women of our imaginations—superheroines and fictional women throughout literature—should derive their power from the same relationships. When such an essential part of a woman's identity is wholly ignored in the popular stories of a culture, the female characters who are supposed to represent real American women are never as commanding or original as their male counterparts, who almost always have rich and varied relationships with one another.

Wonder Woman was not the only great woman of the 20th century to recognize this oft-overlooked necessity of female friendship. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf

comments on female relationships in literature, writing, “I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends...they are now and then mothers or daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men” (143). What if the roles had been reversed, and men had only been written in relation to women, Woolf asks, and “never as the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer! ...as indeed literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women” (145). These shutting doors are what come of what philosopher Simone de Beauvoir calls women’s role as “The Other” in society. She argues that throughout time man has been seen as the subject of history and mythology, the active sex, the essential and absolute version of humanity, while women are seen as the incidental and inessential “Other” (de Beauvoir 677). When women are thought of as passive supporting characters to man’s glorious drama or, in superhero comics, sidekicks and cheerleaders to their Earth-saving battles, it is impossible for them to have complex relationships with other women. They therefore inevitably become cardboard-cutout stereotypes instead of developed, flawed humans in and of themselves. For a woman to be seen as the active sex, an equal partner in the experience of human life and anything other than “The Other,” she cannot be the only representative of her sex. Without female friends, no woman in classic literature, in comics, or in day to day reality can achieve the full potential afforded to the men who constantly interact with one another as a matter of course.

The portrayals of women in comic books may not seem as socially influential as those in the literature Woolf cited in *A Room of One’s Own*. However, comics may actually be more indicative of societal perceptions than works considered to be more serious and to have more

depth of meaning. Williams writes in “All’s Fair in Love and Journalism,” an analysis of female rivalry in Superman comics, that:

Comics project a complete fantasy world, one which reflects the values, fears and expectations of society “in more subtle (and more subtly accurate) ways” than do other, more realistic forms of popular culture...it can be expected, therefore, that the choices which a comic book character such as Lois Lane makes or is prevented from making will bear a relationship to the choices which are considered appropriate for women in the real world. (104)

Because comics, especially superhero comics, exist in a fantastical world of far-off planets, alternate dimensions, and inhuman abilities, the details of human life and social interaction that are kept intact must be the ones vitally important the writers’ lives. In the world of comic books, anything can happen and nothing we are familiar with has to exist. So, the fact that in comics both today and in the past women are not shown interacting with each other healthily demonstrates how deeply stereotypes and gender roles are ingrained in America’s collective consciousness. We cannot even imagine a fantasy world functioning properly without them.

HISTORY’S IMPACT ON HEROINES IN THE GOLDEN AND SILVER AGES

Female characters in comics have had even more obstacles to equal representation than the women in other mediums of art and literature because for much of the first ages of comics such discrimination was institutionalized by big comics publishers. The Golden Age of comics (c. 1938-1955) represented all the shifting gender roles that became necessary during World War II: women took over for fighting men both as comic writers and comic characters. But the Silver Age (c. 1956-1970) marked a shift back to the rigid social structures of *Leave it to Beaver*

and

Father Knows Best. This shift came largely from the great Comic-Book Scare of the 1950s, during which adults feared that their children were being corrupted by the violent and sexual undertones in comic books. Leading the charge against this corruption of American values was Fredrick Wertham, a psychiatrist who spurred mass comic book burnings and a dramatic drop in comic sales with his book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. The introduction of *Seduction* claims that the book is “the result of seven years of scientific investigation” (Hajdu 233). But Wertham’s work was far from scholarly: one of his main “scientific” findings was that comics caused juvenile delinquency because many convicted delinquents read comics. By the same logic, eating tomato sauce would make a person a murderer because surely many murderers enjoy spaghetti.

His results, however, were taken seriously by the masses, and the Comics Code Authority was born, laying out an inspection process and a set of rigid rules for every comic to adhere to. Under the Comics Code “[no writers could] challenge any ‘respected institutions’—marriage, school, family, religion, government, or others—in stories that could ‘create disrespect for authority’” (Hajdu 306). The code was largely in response to the new breed of frightening characters that spawned in the 1950s: American teenagers. The Comics Scare was less a fear of comics than a fear of what young men and women could do to society if left to their own devices (Madrid 112). The insistence on obeying authority did not bode well for the female comics characters who had just emerged from the rubble of WWII: authority during this era was men, and portraying women in any other way but helpless or boy-crazy became virtually

impossible.

In the '50s, DC Comics' Official Editorial Policy Code was that "The Inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance" (Madrid 85). After 1954, "superhero comics...tended to appease conservative ideology, and gender roles appeared rooted in tradition" (D'amore 1227). During this era, even the mightiest heroines started focusing on how to get their men to propose marriage, only fighting crime on the side. Many female sidekicks and female friends of heroines dropped off the pages, and even after the end of the Scare and the Code Authority, there was lasting damage on how women were portrayed in comics.

Women in a medium as male dominated as comic books cannot be expected to hold their own among bulging, testosterone-filled heroes and still develop identities as original, caring, flawed human beings. Just like women in reality, they need other women to relate to and talk to and learn from, or they run the risk of becoming as colorless and powerless as a single man would be in a world of all women. All too often female characters in superhero comics in the '40s, '50s, and '60s have absolutely no female peers, and when they do, "friends" is certainly not a word to describe their relationship. Girls who find themselves together in stories develop jealousies of each other's looks or rivalries over boyfriends. And when they do get along, they are portrayed as either incompetent or dangerous, a coven of witches intent on dominating and castrating their male betters.

BOY TROUBLE: RIVALRIES AND JEALOUSIES

Whereas when stereotypical men disagree they have straightforward fistfights and shake hands at the end, women's relationships are often portrayed as much sneakier. If popular

opinion is to be believed, women employ backhanded compliments and gossip behind their “friends” backs, battling with the silent treatment and flirting with other people’s boyfriends. Rind writes, “Female friendships are traditionally believed to be characterized by disloyalty because women are believed to be catty and competitive in such friendships, particularly when a man is involved” (147). The phenomenon has even been given a name in recent years, almost exclusively applied to women: “frenemy.” Usually this love-on-the-surface, hate-boiling-underneath relationship has a man at the center of it, whom both women will do anything to possess. Rind writes, “These [female] relationships have been denigrated within a culture that, as evidenced by all forms of media, values the male-female lover relationship above all others. The most common happy ending is still one in which the man and woman live happily ever after” regardless of the damage done to other women along the way (147). In no other comic character is this idea of rivalry clearer than Lois Lane.

Lois, a reporter for Metropolis’s Daily Planet and Superman’s primary love interest, was introduced in the same issue as Superman, 1938’s *Action Comics* #1. In the 1940s, Lois was a career woman who would go to any lengths to investigate a story, and she was always after the biggest scoop of all: Superman’s secret identity (Madrid 65). But in 1958 Lois got her own title, *Superman’s Girlfriend, Lois Lane*, and she was no longer obsessed with winning a Pulitzer, but with becoming Mrs. Superman. Lois’s entire character changed into that of a jealous child who needed to be the center of attention. In *The Supergirls*, Madrid writes, “Lois embodied an archetype that was distinct to postwar America: the adult female brat” (69). At no time is Lois’s simpering need for Superman’s love clearer than when she is battling her best friend/rival, Lana Lang.

Lana is a broadcast news reporter and was Superman’s high school girlfriend; she is

equally determined to lead the caped hero to the altar. She was written into the series with the express purpose of rivalry, as Williams writes in his analysis of the two women: “Just as Superman faced regularly recurring villains such as Lex Luthor. Lois needed a nemesis of her own. This was to be Lana’s role. The difference, of course, was the scope the conflict” (107).

While Superman fights his nemesis to stop him from destroying the planet, Lois fights her supposed best friend over and over to stop her from stealing her boyfriend, demonstrating the

pettiness of women’s expected roles in the world. One of the most absurd examples of their rivalry is in a story called “The Battle Between Super-Lois and Super-Lana!” After going for a



swim in a magic lake, both women gain

superpowers, which they promptly use not to fight for justice, but to fight for a

man. Lana tries to prove her devotion

and housekeeping skills to Superman by

baking him an enormous pizza, while

Lois squeezes syrup out of maple trees

and fries him a giant stack of pancakes

(*Lois Lane* #21). This one-upwomanship

is a theme throughout almost every

issue of *Lois Lane*, but Superman is

never swayed, never saying he prefers one woman or the other and always simply shaking his head at their schemes like a disappointed father.

Despite this constant competition, Lois and Lana determinedly keep up the façade of friendship. Their exclamations of “darling” and “dear” are the thin, socially-acceptable veils that cover the real words they would like to, and sometimes do, hurl at each other. When Lana is first introduced in “The Girl Who Stole Superman,” Lois insists that she should come stay in the city with her and even gets her a photographer job at the *Daily Planet*. The two seem to be becoming fast friends until Lois thinks, “She’s so pretty! I wonder if, when she sees Superman, she’ll try...but that’s nonsense! She’s so grateful for what I’ve done she’d never try to steal him away from me!” (*Lois Lane* #7). When Lois realizes that stealing Superman is exactly what Lana plans to do, instead of talking through the conflict, she gives her the silent treatment. By the end of the issue, their rivalry is cemented as the central conflict in the comic, but throughout the series they both keep up the appearance of cordiality. In one story Lana gets superpowers to impress Superman, and Lois pretends to help her win the Man of Steel while seething with jealousy inside, saying “Congratulations, Lana! It couldn’t happen to a nicer girl...gulp... (except *me!*)” (*Lois Lane* #12). Because comics subtly reflect the expectations and prejudices of the society in which they are written, this two-facedness is shown as the natural way for women to behave together.

The saddest part about Lois and Lana’s relationship is that were they not so consumed by their desire for the same man, they would have all the makings of genuinely good friends. Williams writes, “Lana is the only continuing female character on an equal basis with Lois. Other female characters are younger or in an inferior social position to Lois. Only Lana shares Lois’ position as a star reporter” (11). They share the same level of education, the same high achievement in their journalistic careers, yet, “The idea that a sincere friendship could exist

between two women who desire the same man is rejected, and the romantic relationship is declared more important than friendship between women” (Williams 109). In romantic relationships in the 1950s, the balance of power was predictable, safely weighing in favor of the man. But, if there were ever a stable, lasting relationship between two women, no man would be in control, and the world would spin into the chaos of women’s rule. Therefore, it was safer to keep traditional romantic relationships intact in these popular comics stories and keep the women, now seen as no more than potential love interests, at each other’s throats.

It is a wonder Superman was able to save the planet from destruction as many times as he did with these women constantly fighting over his attention. But he was not the only one struggling out of the petty clutches of rivaling women; by the 1950s, DC’s other iconic hero, Batman, had also become a victim. Batman had little use for female companionship during the early years, but with the Comic-Book Scare and the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, that had to change. In the book, Wertham accuses Batman and his young ward, Robin, of having a homosexual relationship. To reassure readers, in 1956 DC began writing in potential female love interests to fight for Batman’s affections—though they were careful to make them neither sexy nor intimidating to keep to the newly-established Code—notably in *Batman* #197, “Catwoman Sets Her Claws for Batman,” in which infamous cat burglar Catwoman sees Batman’s young ally Batgirl as a threat (Madrid 59). Instead of committing crimes, Catwoman starts assisting the bewildered Batman and Robin, saying, “It’s a purr-fect demonstration that anything Batgirl can do, I can do better!” Although Catwoman soon makes it clear that her end game is marriage to Batman, the suggestion of romance is only slight compared to Lois Lane’s rivalries. The real battle here is to prove that no matter how powerful each woman is, there can only ever be one female member in a crimefighting group. Any more, and disaster strikes.

COVENS: WOMEN TOGETHER? MUST BE WITCHCRAFT

With the representation of female relationships as one constant catfight, there is little wonder why all Marvel comics and many DC comics in the Golden and Silver Ages typically featured as few girls as possible in crime fighting teams. One woman on a team seemed to serve a purpose: she was someone for the heroes to look at and flirt with or someone to scold the boys for roughhousing and displaying bad manners at the team meal (D'amore 1229). One girl could fulfill the role of girlfriend, like *Fantastic Four*'s Sue Storm, "Invisible Girl," did for the much older and father-like Reed Richards, who treats her like a child, saying, "Just like a woman Everything I do is for your own good, but you're too scatter-brained and emotional to *realize* it!" (Madrid 11). Or the token female character could act as a mother, like Jean Grey, "Marvel Girl," did for her fellow young mutants in early *X-Men* comics, maternally scolding the boys for misbehavior: "Very well, young man! I shall hold you in the air telekinetically until you promise to settle down and listen to me!" (*The X-Men* #17). These token girls in Marvel comics had clear roles in the group during the Silver Age, and they served practical purposes to their largely male teams. But adding more than one female to a super group was just asking for trouble. Even when the girls do get along, together they create at best a culture of distraction and incompetence and at worst all-out female revolt.

One of the first females in a superhero team was Wonder Woman in The Justice Society of America, for which she uses her astonishing strength, magical lasso of truth, and brilliant cunning in the all-important role of—secretary. The sole woman on the team—with Hawkman,



The Flash, and The Green Lantern to name a few—rarely saw action when she first joined in 1942 and rarely interacted with any other female characters. There were other women eager to help, however: the girlfriends of each male member. Bulletman had Bulletgirl, The Flame had Flamegirl, Rocketman had Rocketgirl, and so on. Each of these women had “girl” or some other inferior title to insinuate incapability and subordination. All wore female versions of their boyfriends’ costumes and were introduced to crime fighting by men who played fatherly roles (Madrid 12). Madrid writes, “The message here was that these women didn’t have any inherent desire to do good; they were merely fighting crime to prove their love for their boyfriends... [They were] weak appendages to the men” (13). In one Justice Society story, the girls try to team up without their boyfriends’ permission, led by Wonder Woman, who also has no decision-making power. Wonder Woman rounds up the girlfriends to help her pursue a criminal mastermind, but the women soon fall into a trap and are taken hostage to be used as bait when the boys arrive. Once captured, Wonder Woman laments, “We’ve been tricked—tricked by the ‘Brain Wave’s’ thought images! We certainly got ourselves into a jam, didn’t we?” (*All-Star Comics* #15). Clearly women should not join forces, for there can be no brains in a group of weak appendages.

Surprisingly, during the rigid 1950s there were a few superhero teams that managed to

pass the Comics Code and at the same time consistently include more than just one woman. The Legion of Superheroes, a regular feature in *Action Comics*, was first introduced in 1958, and one third of the 25 or so young team members were female (Madrid 135). Although they did have names that indicated youth and innocence—Triplicate Girl, Phantom Girl, Princess Projecta, Shadow Lass—they were not subordinate to the young men in the group, who had similar names and powers—Superboy, Cosmic Boy, Lightning Lad, etc. Saturn Girl even becomes the first female leader of the team in 1964. This many girls being more or less equal with boys created a revolutionary team dynamic, but in the early years, the girls of the Legion (also called the girl Legionnaires), were often more of a hindrance to heroic missions than a help.

In one bizarre Legion of Superheroes story called “The Condemned Legionnaires,” all the female members of the group are stricken by a “crimson virus” and are quarantined in a huge bubble to protect the male members from infection (*Adventure Comics* #313). The boys eventually discover that “Satan Girl” and her red kryptonite is the source of the virus. In the Bible, woman’s punishment for succumbing to the devil’s temptation in the Garden of Eden is painful childbirth, and by extension, monthly menstruation. The idea that all at once, almost all the girls have “synched up,” and been infected by a “crimson virus” inflicted by Satan Girl is almost too obvious an allusion. The quarantine is reminiscent of the fictitious but fact-based biblical novel *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant, in which all the women of the community stay together in “the red tent” for the duration of their menstrual cycle. But there is one girl



Legionnaire seemingly unaffected by the illness; Supergirl remains impervious and goes after Satan Girl to obtain a cure for her crime fighting

sisters. But during their battle Supergirl
pulls off Satan

Girl's mask to find—her own face!
Satan Girl is a double of Supergirl, a
split consciousness of the sweet heroine
from Krypton. Supergirl, the oft-called

most powerful of the girl Legionnaires, was actually causing all the trouble with the red kryptonite because her angelic and evil sides were at war: in other words, she was moody. And as the most dominant woman in the group, Supergirl naturally led the other heroines into a crimson illness. In this story, the female members of the Legion bring danger of foreign infection to the boys and distract the team from fighting crime with their women's issues.

At least in these two cases the women are only a distraction. The other danger in girls teaming up and communicating with one another is rebellion against the men who—no matter their stated equal standing—are considered to be in charge. As Madrid writes of the Legion, “While the assumption at one time may have been that a team with more than one female would turn into a treacherous coven of witches out to overthrow the men, the results never turned out to be that disastrous” (143). Perhaps the results were never that disastrous, but they did come close a number of times. In a Legion story called “The Revolt of the Girl Legionnaires,” the girls are hypnotized by the queen of matriarchal planet and made to seduce the boys and destroy them. In one panel the girls are laughing and dancing cruelly after defeating the boys—Saturn Girl says,

“Ha, ha, ha! The Super-Hero Legion is all ours, now! Laugh it up! Dance! Sing!” Supergirl grins

while doing the twist, saying, “We’ll change the club constitution so no boys can join, ever! — Ugh! How I hate them!” (*Adventure Comics* #326). The girls are cured of their man-hate by the end of the story and repent. But, “Despite the fact that the girls were duped into turning on their male teammates and boyfriends, their all too convincing resentment hinted at a seething

dissatisfaction with their inferior status within the team” (Madrid 141). In

asimilar story, “The Mutiny of the

Superheroines,” an alien ambassador from another matriarchal planet crashes to Earth and



enhances the heroines’ powers so they can revolt against their patriarchy. Again, the girls attempt to make the Legion an all-female team, saying to the defeated boys, “We’ve decide you’re too weak to be in the Legion, so we’re taking over and you’re out!” (*Adventure Comics* #368).

Supergirl soon resists the evil ambassador’s influence and releases the girls from their enhanced powers. The message here is clear: if women get too much power, it is only a matter of time before the castrations begin.

The fear of women gaining power and taking over has long been a concern for male-dominated societies. The idea goes back to the Salem witch trials, during which women with the slightest abilities or abnormalities were hanged or burned at the stake. Several Golden and Silver Age comics demonstrate that same persistent fear in the most literal terms. The first

issue of

Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane included a story called "The Witch of Metropolis," wherein Lois is cursed by the spirit of a colonial witch to become a disfigured hag during the night. She uses her magic to scoop new stories for the *Daily Planet* and is ashamed: "It was unfair to use sorcery for my own petty advantage! Am I—I turning evil, like all witches in history?" She soon confesses her crime to Superman and the curse wears off (*Lois Lane* #1).



In another story, "The Black Magic of Supergirl," Supergirl is given the "Satan Ring," along with a warning that if she uses its magic three times, she will lose her soul and become a demon. She uses the ring once to save her beloved mentor Superman from Kryptonite, again to save an innocent man from the electric chair, and once more to save her father's life during surgery, saying "I don't care if I *do* turn into some monstrous demon! I'd pay any price to keep dad alive. *choke! *" (*Action Comics* #324). She throws herself into the sun to destroy the demon that starts growing inside her, and in the end confesses her shame to Superman, begging him, "Please don't tell anyone I once was a she-devil. It's something I'd rather forget!" Neither

of these women use newly-discovered, so-called "evil" powers to do evil deeds: one tries to further her career, and the other selflessly saves the lives of three men. Yet both are ashamed by their transgressions into witchcraft and seek forgiveness from the dominant men in their lives.

This shame harkens back to a time when a woman was seen as on the same level as a child: subordinate by definition and fearful of what the father figure will say when he finds out what kind of mess she has made in the kitchen. Luckily, there is one woman from the early days who had no superior man to apologize to—and nothing to apologize for.

WONDER WOMAN'S EXAMPLE: REAL BEST FRIENDSHIP

All these women joining forces and gaining power together are isolated stories, but what could the reaction be against a heroine who leads armies of women in every single issue? Wonder Woman and her friends could not distract or overtake their male leaders because they had no male leaders. The almost entirely female cast of Wonder Woman's two starring 1940s titles—*Wonder Woman* and *Sensation Comics*—created some of the best examples of female friendships in comics before the age of the Comic-Book Scare.

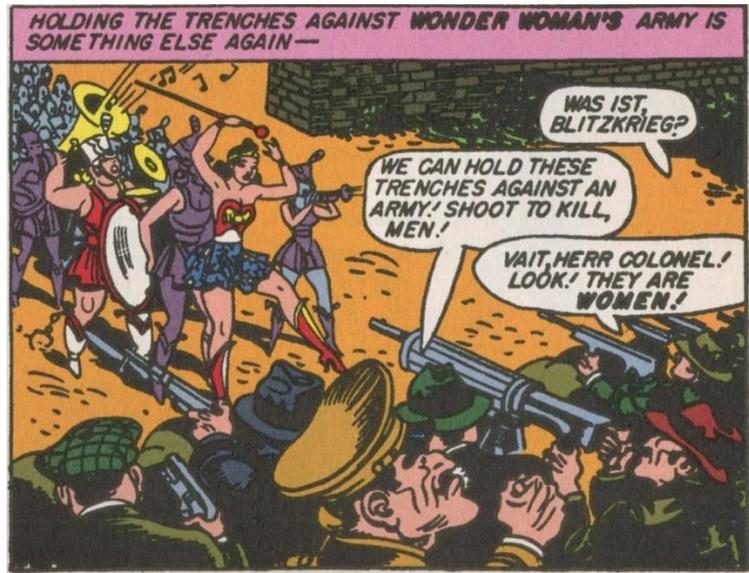
Wonder Woman is the ultimate threat to a masculine world. She was raised on an island inhabited only by women, and in some origin stories she doesn't even have a father—instead formed from clay by her mother, Hippolyta, the queen of Paradise Island. The island women, or Amazons, are not in constant competition with one another, nor are they scheming together to overthrow men. They simply exist without men, and no man is allowed to set foot on Paradise Island; the bracelets of submission that all Amazons wear on their wrists serve as a keen reminder of man's evil past deeds. Madrid writes that “The Amazons must forever wear the shackles with which they were enslaved to remind them of the folly of submitting to men's domination” (36). However, the mindset that goes along with the bracelets is one of mistrust for men, never fear of them. The island is therefore home to a group of likeminded women who have *chosen* independence and isolation instead of being forced into it by fear or hatred of those who

once enslaved them. When Wonder Woman leaves Paradise Island at the start of her adventures, she sacrifices her birthright to help women who had not yet made this choice: “She forsook her kingdom and immortality to make the whole world a better place and, most of all, to fight for the rights of females” (Madrid 42). She returns to the island often and has many more adventures with the Amazons.

In the land of man’s rule, Wonder Woman quickly amasses a new collection of allies—the most prominent of whom are Etta Candy and the Holliday Girls. Etta, a chubby, opinionated girl obsessed with candy, is the president of Holliday College sorority Beeta Lambda, home to the Holliday Girls. The girls eagerly accompany Wonder Woman on her missions whenever called upon through their telepathic radio. The first time Wonder Woman calls for Etta’s help to rescue her boyfriend, Steve, who has been captured by Nazi spies (not for the first time and not for the last), the girls form an army out of their college marching band (*Sensation Comics* #2). The German soldiers they march on are baffled by the all-woman assault, and the girls distract the soldiers by dancing, then hold them down and handcuff them. While Wonder Woman carries an injured Steve to safety, Etta locks up the villainess who kidnapped him. In another story called “Wonder Woman for President”—set 1,000 years in the future when that kind of thing might be possible—Wonder Woman runs for president of the United States, and Etta is on the ticket as her vice president. When Etta figures out how to rescue Wonder Woman from a frozen state in the same story, Wonder Woman says, “Etta, you’re the best friend a girl ever had! I knew

I could count on you!” Etta replies with the characteristic frankness of any good best friend:

“Yeah—but don’t try it again unless I’ve had plenty of candy—my brain might jam!” (*Wonder Woman* #7). Etta and The Holliday Girls are loyal allies, but jealousies do infiltrate the group on occasion. However, their differences never distract them from crime fighting, and by the end of every issue they are a team again.



Wonder Woman has talent making friends even out of her enemies, her focus never on punishing female villains, but on reforming them. When she and the Holliday Girls capture wealthy store owner Gloria Bullfinch, who had been abusing her workers, the Holliday Girls’ first reaction is to haze and initiate her into their sorority, saying, “Whee! A new member for Beeta Lambda!” Wonder Woman quickly stops them, saying, “Wait Girls! This is no initiation—it’s a serious experiment in reforming human character” (*Sensation Comics* #8). By the end of the issue, Gloria Bullfinch understands her error and improves her workers’ conditions. An even more dramatic transformation happened with one of Wonder Woman’s first recurring arch villains, Baroness Paula Von Gunther, a Nazi scientist who faced Wonder Woman many times in her quest to enslave young women to be trained in Nazi espionage (*Sensation Comics* #4). When Wonder Woman finally defeats Paula, she does not send her to a prison or asylum for her misdeeds, but instead to Paradise Island to be reformed and eventually accepted as an Amazon (*Wonder Woman* #4). Paula becomes a valuable ally as the Amazons’ chief scientist, dividing her

time between Paradise Island and a secret laboratory hidden under Holliday College to help Wonder Woman on her missions. After one adventure, Wonder Woman puts her hand on Paula's shoulder and says, "I have never had a braver or more loyal companion than you, Paula—nor one half so clever!" (*Wonder Woman* #4). This focus on befriending instead of hating, reforming instead of punishing, was one of the main focuses of Wonder Woman's creator.

In 1941, William Moulton Marston introduced his iconic heroine's mission: "To save the world from the hatreds and wars of men in a man-made world!" (*Sensation Comics* #1). His purpose in creating a woman who could befriend and better all womankind was clear from the beginning: "Marston felt that women were superior to men, and his goal was to create a female role model to inspire young girl readers to stand up for themselves and achieve their true potential" (Madrid 35). These fine ideas were somewhat marred in almost every issue by images of bondage—whether Wonder Woman and friends being tied up by their enemies or Wonder Woman and friends doing the tying. Marston had his own famously interesting takes on sexuality, including a polyamorous relationship with his wife and secretary. But if the suggestive images were lost on this audience of "young girl readers," who were too distracted by the empowering idea of women working together in peace, they certainly were not lost on Comics Scare purveyor Fredrick Wertham, who got his own ideas from all this female love.

In his panic-inducing book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham wrote, "The homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type story is psychologically unmistakable" (192). He said, "For boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image. For girls she is a morbid ideal...Wonder Woman has her own female following...Her followers are the 'Holliday girls,' i.e. the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls. Wonder Woman refers to them as 'my girls'" (193). Wonder Woman is the only superheroine in the early days of comics to have numerous female

friends, and the postwar public could not be satisfied about their subordination through examples of typical womanly behavior—cat fighting over boys, incompetence in the face of man’s work, or evil witchcraft to usurp male leaders. So what could they possibly make of a group of equally powerful women calmly working together to fight crime? Easy. Lesbians. It was inconceivable at that time that a group of women could interact together so harmlessly, so Wertham and others explained away the healthy platonic friendships with an idea that at that time seemed dangerous and unnatural. Thus, he preserved man’s role as the only sex that can credibly be trusted to work together in a “normal” way without something going terribly wrong.

These fears and biases in the 1950s changed Wonder Woman dramatically, and when Marston died in 1947, so did Wonder Woman’s feminism. Etta and the Holliday Girls all but vanished from the pages in the ‘50s, as did Paula and the Amazons. Instead of devoting her efforts to empowering womankind, now Wonder Woman was more concerned with keeping Steve happy and making her heterosexuality abundantly clear.

Wonder Woman’s circle of strong female friends was revolutionary in its time, and it eventually helped inspire generations of women to overcome discrimination and fight together for liberation in the real world. But despite her iconic status and lasting success, not even Wonder Woman could escape the institutionalized discrimination prevalent in the mainstream comics publishing world during the Silver Age. Her legacy has endured, however, to pave the way for new wonder women to overcome their own obstacles.

SAME GIRLS, DIFFERENT STORIES: THE STATE OF COMIC HEROINES TODAY

Many of these same heroines still have their own titles today, in which female friendship now plays a starring role. Wonder Woman has reclaimed her position as a friend to other women in two new titles: *The New 52's Wonder Woman* (2011), in which a troubled half sister is added to the female cast, and *The Legend of Wonder Woman* (2016), in which Etta Candy and the Holliday Girls are still helping out. Batgirl's popular new 2015 title also features more women than ever, a constant parade of roommates, best friends, and co-workers to confide in and work with. Even Marvel Comics, whose only female characters of note in the '40s and '50s were the friendless Invisible Girl and Marvel Girl, has created a cast of three dimensional female allies in 2014's *She-Hulk*.

For the most part, superhero teams have also evolved positively. The women of The Justice Society of America are no longer girlfriends and weak appendages to men; instead female representation is nearly equal to male, and Power Girl even becomes the Society's chairperson in 2007 (Madrid 312). All-female buddy series such as *Birds of Prey* and *DC Comics Bombshells* bring together classic DC heroines in all-female casts, resisting de Beauvoir's idea of women as always "The Other." These women are the active sex in their own stories: they fight each other, hurt each other, love each other, challenge each other, and better each other, proving that the world is just as interesting and multifaceted through the eyes of women.

Women gaining more roles as writers, illustrators, and characters has been a trend throughout all of art and literature, but comics have also had a trend all their own; because comics characters exist in countless different timelines and alternate realities, the heroines of the 1940s and '50s can return to counsel a new generation. Madrid writes, "Two common themes in comic books of the 21st century are women helping each other to grow, and the

passage of knowledge from one generation of females to another” (311). The little-known heroine Red Tornado of the 1940s—a large, imperious mother called Ma Hunkel who protected her children by donning metal pot over her head to become “The Defender of the Weak, The Beater-Upper of All Evil Doers!”—returns to the new Justice Society of America stories in 2007 to mentor her granddaughter, named “Cyclone” in honor of her pioneering grandmother (*All-American Comics* #20, *Justice Society of America* #2). Another newer heroine in the DC Universe, Kate Spencer, also known as Manhunter, discovers that her grandmother was the original 1940s Phantom Lady. These stories show a genuine shift not only toward remembering the forgotten heroines who helped create the comic book medium, but also toward showing women in all their varied relationships. These mentors and guides from the past show a respect for all the ways women can help and relate to one another.

Despite these advances, not every superhero title today features the multidimensional relationships that create compelling characters. The Comics Code Authority no longer holds any power against the major comics publishers, and Wertham’s damaging “psychological” work has been largely discredited; in fact, both the Code and *Seduction of the Innocent* are now considered the driving forces that effectively killed the experimental style and progressive portrayals of women prevalent in the Golden Age. But the institutionalized discrimination not only crippled the comics of the past—despite the inspiring examples of female friendship in the modern comics listed above, there are still lasting effects on comics heroines even today.

The new danger of women appearing without peers; in some ways in the ‘40s and ‘50s, but unfortunately it is no less problematic: complete defeminization. On the surface, powerful heroines such as Manhunter—a lawyer out to punish the criminals she cannot stop through the

court system—and Black Widow—the gun toting heroine of Marvel’s *Avengers* fame—seem ideal equals to male superheroes. However, without real female allies and friends they are still just as two dimensional as the stereotypical helpless housewives of the 1950s, only now instead of emulating the perfect female, they emulate the perfect male: coldblooded, intent on dominating and destroying their enemies, and lashing out at anyone who claims they are not tough enough. Manhunter (2004-2007) usually works with other women only to even the odds in brawls and ignores Wonder Woman’s focus on reform and mercy; instead she has no qualms about killing the “human vermin” that riddle the city of Los Angeles (Madrid 310). In her 2016 title of the same name, Black Widow hardly ever speaks to other women unless she is fighting them off as enemies or remembering them in their role as tormenters from a miserable childhood. As a result, both on page and screen she has little dimension and few character traits beyond her ability to punch and kick and shoot people (*Black Widow* #1). There is nothing wrong with both of these women being tough, but when a woman in a cast of all men devotes her every energy to fitting in with those men while scorning the company of other women, she is not a whole, unique character. She becomes the dependent force, the one relying on cues from the men around her on how to behave instead of embracing all the experiences and perspectives and ideas she has gained as a woman and contributing to heroic efforts in a unique way.

These women are so intent on being seen as intimidating and competitive, being just “one of the guys,” that they have discarded anything remotely feminine about themselves as though being a woman is something to be ashamed of, as if traditionally male characteristics are strong, while traditionally female characteristics are weak. No woman should have to choose between these two extremes of existence; a real woman makes her own decisions regardless of how her

peers will perceive her and understands that to be a fully-formed human being one cannot be a cardboard cutout of what we think of as a “man” or what we think of as a “woman.” Without true relationships with characters of both sexes, she cannot discover her own place on the spectrum, and is instead forced to mold herself into a flickering copy of those who surround her, a woman without an identity of her own.

This idea is perfectly illustrated in C.D.C. Reeve’s poignant criticism of another male-dominated fictional world: Socrates’s ideal city ruled by logic, Kallipolis, from *Plato’s Republic*. Kallipolis and the fantasy universes in Marvel and DC comics may seem completely unrelated, but both are governed by desire for a perfect society and ruled by male ideals. In her critical essay, Reeves writes an imagined philosophical debate between Plato and one of the few female students of his Academy, Lasthenia of Mantinea (who incidentally is presenting ideas she and her friend Axiothea, another woman in the Academy, discussed together). The values emphasized in Kallipolis are philosophy and warfare, while weaving, cooking, and emotional closeness are dismissed as lesser pursuits. Lasthenia asks Plato, “If women and men were treated equally in Kallipolis, wouldn’t the things that women value have to be given as much initial weight as the things that men do?” (135). She claims that, “What he [Socrates] has done instead is, first to make an entirely ‘masculinized’ world and give women the freedom to be ‘men’ in it” (136). This is the same situation in comics when Wonder Woman’s reformation through love and Red Tornado’s maternal concerns are shown as lesser pursuits than constant violence. Most telling may be one of Lasthenia’s last assertions:

The result is that his [Socrates’s] ideal society, while it strives to treat men and women equally, actually subordinates women to men more effectively than ever, by extirpating women’s values from it almost entirely. What it gives us is not a

world in which men and women are treated equally, but a world in which *women* don't exist, a world which is really a world of men with penises and men without them. (136)

This type of world creates saturated female characters who cannot possibly develop meaningful relationships with each other because they are given no original perspectives or opinions to share from their personal experience of lives as women. While popular male heroes today have banter and camaraderie because they have distinct and independent personalities, many women are just portrayed as stereotypes when there are more than one of them. Without giving heroines other women to confide in and be real with, comics run the danger of making their women simply bland, unrealistic copies of their men and dismissing real women from the world altogether.

CONCLUSION: A NECESSARY BATTLE

The pursuit of equal representation in comics may seem a pointless endeavor; comics are a boy's fantasy world, the domain of men. Why would women even worry about their portrayals in comics when other more widespread mediums of storytelling have gone through these same eras of discrimination and have presented women just as harshly? The truth is comics have had a strong female readership dating back to the early 1940s, and in fact at one time there were more girls reading comics than boys (Robbins 7). These girls were mostly reading *Archie* and other teen comics that catered specifically to them, but this high number of female readers shows a clear love of the medium and art form; a love that would have been shown for superhero comics across the decades if only young women could see some of themselves in those stories, too, if only those fantasy women were represented with experiences and desires similar to the girls they were supposed to inspire. Since modern comics have begun showing women and their relationships more realistically, scores of female readers have again flocked to the flashy,

brightly-checked pages that fill the comics racks. According to an independent report by

Graphic

Policy, which counts all the Facebook users in the U.S. who list comics as a hobby or a “like,” in September 2015 men accounted for 54.76% of comic readers and women accounted for 42.86% (Barnett). Superhero comics have more female readers than ever before, readers eager to flip open their pages to stories about powerful women with powerful friends.

There are also other reasons to look closely at representations in comics: more and more educators have realized the potential of comics in helping students learn to read. Before a new reader learns to glean meaning from traditional texts by looking at word choice, syntax, grammar, and sentence structure, she can first learn the skill of juggling narrative cues from the more obvious visual parts of a comic book. With comics, she must look at the action and emotion of the characters through the art in each panel, then must differentiate the meaning of the words between thought bubbles, speech bubbles, and narration boxes. Understanding how all these separate parts come together to create meaning in comics translates into greater success with more traditional reading (Rapp 64). The girls who are picking up comic books as an introduction to literature deserve to have the first words they can confidently read be about women whose stories and relationships teach them to be confident in everything else they do.

All of this show the clear practical need for representations of healthy and highly-valued female relationships in comics. But the need goes far beyond what can be tested and quantified. Superheroines are what the modern world has invented to represent the ideal woman, the strongest and wisest of the female sex. They are the goddesses of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Minervas and Athenas of our time. If these women cannot be held up to the highest standard of

womanhood and humanity, if they cannot be shown to have real and lasting relationships with one another, how can the real women of the world be expected to join together and interact freely to better themselves and each other? How can young girls be expected to hold on to their best friends when they pick up a comic book and see the perfect women of the quintessential comic era scratch each other's eyes out for men, laugh cruelly together as those same men suffer at their hands, or allow their friends to drop out of their lives when times get tough? What could they think when they watch the modern heroines in shiny new comics reject and scorn members of their own sex as weak? Women cannot develop their own friendships and organize together to achieve equality if they never see that such a thing is possible in their culture's time-honored stories. And if they cannot nurture other women, it becomes almost impossible to nurture themselves.

As Rind writes in *Women's Best Friendships*, "To never see women as they are in relation to other women, and to never explore their relationships, is to never understand so much of the richness—so many of the dimensions—of who they are" (3). Anything that real women enjoy and learn from and want to be a part of should show this richness and complexity of who they are, should acknowledge that they are equal partners in the human experience, not merely the "Other" to stand on the sidelines as secondary characters even in fantasy worlds. To do this one woman cannot be expected to stand alone out on the battlefield. Until more of the most powerful women of our imaginations have friends and allies to challenge and support them, Sappho and all the caped women in tights she has inspired will just have to keep on suffering.

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