



THE QUEER LITERARY ORIGINS OF WONDER WOMAN FROM HOMER AND SAPPHO TO CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

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Six months before the Second World War came to an end, William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman—both comics and character—declared his intention for the iconic comics. “Frankly,” Marston—who created the lie detection test and was obsessed with bondage—said, “Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.” It was a telling, if ironic, statement: the Wonder Woman comics, from their birth in 1941, had always been about restoring sociopolitical power to women, yet these early texts were created predominantly by men.

Despite this, Wonder Woman undoubtedly brightened the thunderous days of war for many American female readers of comics, as she seemed to show what we still, revealingly, struggle with today: that a woman could star in a successful franchise without it being directed primarily at any gender demographic. (That the upcoming Wonder Woman film is the character’s first solo cinematic venture, despite her great fame, says much.) Marston was both right and wrong: his was the age of the rise of the more socially conscious, so-called “new woman” in the United States, yet Wonder Woman herself was only new in a visual, cultural-iconic sense, for she had been born from a long history of literary and political texts.

“Wonder Woman was from the start a character founded in scholarship,” Phi Beta Kappa’s—Marston’s beloved fraternity—The Key Reporter declared in 1942, echoing this sentiment. If Wonder Woman has her origins in Paradise Island, the island itself—and its wondrous women alike—owe a debt to Greek epics, feminist utopian novels, and queer literature. When the Amazonian heroine shouts “suffering Sappho!”—perhaps her most emblematic exclamation—this is no coincidence; she was indeed built from the fragmentary poems of Sappho of Lesbos, alongside many other texts.

From the beginning, Marston and the comic’s first artist, Harry G. Peter, made Wonder Woman’s literary connections clear. “As lovely as Aphrodite—as wise as Athena—with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules,” Marston, then writing under the penname Charles Moulton, proclaimed her in an introductory text above the opening panel of a comic in *Sensation Comics* #8, in which the striking new character—“a woman to whom the problems and feats of men are mere

child's play"—debuted. Marston was already drawing parallels to gods from classical Greek literature. Wonder Woman—who Marston initially named “Suprema, the Wonder Woman” before his editor Sheldon Mayer, who’d also edited Superman, told him to cut “Suprema”—was explicitly American, her red, white, and blue outfit meant to parallel the then-new Captain America’s hyper-patriotic palette, but she was an American from the Mediterranean.

Indeed, Wonder Woman was highly Grecian—and not only because of Marston’s allusions to his fraternity in the early comics. She was portrayed as an Amazon, harkening to the warrior women Amazons of Grecian myth, who were second only to Hercules in popularity on vases depicting mythology. The earliest mention of them appears in Homer’s *Iliad*. “In the days of ancient Greece,” Hippolyte tells Diana—Wonder Woman—“we Amazons were the foremost nation in the world.” In Hippolyte’s tale, Hercules challenges the Amazons after being taunted that he could not defeat the extraordinary women; he loses to Hippolyte, but in retaliation steals her “magic girdle”—a gift from Aphrodite—which causes the Amazons to be enslaved by the men. Later, with Aphrodite’s aid, they flee to Paradise Island, wearing the bracelets that would become Wonder Woman’s signatures as eternal reminders “that we must always keep aloof from men.”

Marston has deftly, if a bit on the nose, transformed the Greek mythos of the Amazons into a template for the comics’ feminist message. The island also echoes the woman-only society in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopian novel from 1915, *Herland*, in which male explorers stumble upon a world—“an undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature”—populated entirely by women who have learnt how to give birth parthenogenetically. In both narratives, the arrival of American men disrupts the women’s relative peace, then leads to one of their women—Ellador in Gilman’s text—leaving their utopia to visit the outside world.

Homer called the Amazons, who may have been based off true warrior women of old, *Amazones antianeirai*, the latter word often translated as “opposites of men.” Classics scholar Adrienne Mayor, however, who has written on the Amazons at length, argues that it should be read as “equals to men.” Either may have inspired two early 20th-century texts about Amazons that also bear striking thematic similarity to Wonder Woman’s origin story: Max Eastman’s *Child of the Amazon and Other Poems* (1913), in which an Amazon falls in love with a man but cannot marry and have children with him until “the far age when men shall cease / Their tyranny”; and Inez Gillmore’s 1914 *Angel Island*, in which American men are shipwrecked on an island containing Amazon-like women. Wonder Woman, merging the superhuman powers of specific Greek gods (who, like many other deities, seem loosely akin to superheroes) with the Amazons’ legendary isolation and woman-ness, was a Second-World-War reincarnation of classical mythos, like some late Art-Deco Grecian urn.

Wonder Woman’s invocation of Sappho braids her to Grecian reality and myth, as the poet of the island of Lesbos was a mixture of both—but, crucially, Wonder Woman’s mention of Sappho also connects her to queerness. If Homer’s fame was such that he was “the Poet” of his world, Sappho was renowned as “the Poetess” in antiquity for her lovely work; also like Homer, who may not have existed at all, relatively little is known of Sappho’s life (though she, at least, certainly appears to have lived). Sadie Holloway, Marston’s wife, adored Sappho, consecrating Henry Thomas Wharton’s 1885 translations of her, which were the first complete translation of the poet in English. Holloway once inscribed a book as “Sappho” and could read the poet of Lesbos in the original Greek. Her fervor for the sensual writer filled her college, Mount Holyoke, the first college for women in the United States. It was Holloway who, many years later, would suggest “Suffering Sappho!” in a memo to DC Comics about what Wonder Woman ought and ought not to exclaim. Don’t use “Vulcan’s Hammer!” Holloway advised; the invocation of Sappho better fitted, she suggested, an isle of Amazons.

From her death c. 570 B.C.E to Wonder Woman's debut, Sappho's writings about queer love were simultaneously cherished and condemned—the latter often by conservative religious zealots. Likewise, a significant reason Wonder Woman became verboten soon after she debuted was her then-implicit bisexuality, having come from a land populated solely by women, and stereotypes about lesbians wishing to “rise above” men, just as Wonder Woman, in this fear-mongering narrative, did. Marston and Holloway lived and shared intimacies with the androgynous Olive Byrne, niece of Margaret Sanger; the trio progressively believed in polyamory, and this, along with Marston's firm conviction that women were superior to men, doubtless influenced how he imagined Wonder Woman's sexuality. The word “lesbian,” famously, derives from the name of the isle Sappho supposedly lived on. (Still, as present-day Wonder Woman writer Greg Rucka cautions, defining queerness can be complicated, as it only exists in definitional opposition to non-queerness. Obviously, Rucka argues, it would probably be the norm, as opposed to “queer,” for the women of a mythic man-free world to be in relationships, so the inhabitants of Paradise Island would only be “queer” to non-queer persons outside the isle.)

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The Sapphic connection may go deeper still. Sappho's best-known poem, a fragment beginning “To an army wife, in Sardis,” is broadly about loving whatever one loves, conventional or not. “Some say a cavalry corps,” the poem begins,

some infantry, some, again,
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest
sight on dark earth; but I say
that whatever one loves, is.

Perhaps this text—an affirmation of open-mindedness, as well as a surface rejection of the things of war—is a page in the guide to Wonder Woman, who also despises war and, particularly in later writers' hands, loves widely.

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Wonder Woman's Sapphic soul, along with her unabashed sexuality, immediately caused problems. Prior to Diana of Paradise Island, depicting “immodesty” in cartoons, including in attire, could lead to legal trouble. Betty Boop, that icon of confident sexuality, had been forced into more modest clothing when the National Legion of Decency and the Hays Code, both of which were conservatively Catholic, appeared in the 1930s, creating reactionary laws that determined what was “objectionable content” in motion pictures. Shortly after Sensation Comics introduced Wonder Woman, the comic appeared on The National Organization for Decent Literature's 1942 list of “Publications Disapproved for Youth.” “Wonder Woman is not sufficiently dressed,” the bishop who had compiled the list argued. In the cover that caught the bishop's attention, Wonder Woman, ironically, was wearing more than she would in later comics.

In the 1950s, depicting queerness in comics—even merely implied—became riskier still. In 1954, Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*—arguably the most infamous book in the history of American comics—came out, in which Wertham railed against what he saw as the dangers of comics. While brief, perhaps the most notorious passages of the book posited that a number of famous comic-book figures promoted homosexuality, most notably Wonder Woman—who Wertham also claimed was “anti-masculine”—and Batman and Robin. Batman and Robin, he

asserted, “is like a wish dream of two homosexuals,” and such comics, he charged, would “stimulate children to homosexual fantasies”; Wonder Woman represented “the Lesbian counterpart of Batman.” (As if by Wertham’s wish, a new strip featuring Batman and Robin waking up in the same bed appeared days after *Seduction of the Innocent*’s publication.)

Wertham’s work was the foundation for a notorious Senate hearing on juvenile delinquency, which Wertham claimed comics engendered in readers. He also likely inspired the infamous Comics Code Authority, which prohibited, among other things, depictions of “sexual abnormalities” and stories that did not uphold “the sanctity of marriage,” meaning that depicting homosexuality was essentially banned, alongside gore, violence, erotic art, and even storylines where “evil” triumphed over “good.” The Comics Code was in effect from 1954 to 2011, though some publications dropped it earlier. In Britain in 1975, the gay magazine *HIM* was raided by police, and the magistrate, as if presiding over a witch trial, ordered that over 16,000 copies of the magazine be burnt. Despite this, many vibrant underground queer scenes produced comics, a number of which are reproduced in anthologies celebrating and trying to recover this history, like Justin Hall’s *No Straight Lines*.

Wonder Woman had been marked, and, under new leadership by Robert Kanigher, was stripped of her feminist subversiveness: straight and pining after men; dainty; a dimwitted damsel in distress. This stigma against depicting queerness in comics—both comic books and newspaper cartoons—persisted late into the century. “Comics and gays. They go together well,” the openly gay cartoonist Jerry Mills wrote in 1986. “After all they have one major thing in common: both tend not to get any respect.” Lynn Johnston, who created the newspaper strip *For Better or Worse*, likely understood this even as a straight woman; in 1993, when her teenage character Lawrence Poirier in came out as gay in a daily strip, Johnston began receiving death threats from conservative readers, and, almost immediately, several newspapers canceled the comic altogether, while others refused to run the strips in which Lawrence was open about his sexuality. That Marston developed the lie detector test layers an ironic poignancy over this history, as the test was used, between 1945 and 1965, to “uncover” homosexuals in the U. S. State Department, costing one thousand people their jobs.

We’ve come a long way since this. Yet the stigma persists. I love finding part of myself in a book—not something that is that naïve word, relatable, but something more like the ringing of a little bell inside you that lets you know, suddenly and with a shock, that someone else like you exists out there. This is partly why queer comics matter, especially when you grow up seeing no one else like you even in your fiction. Why comics starring grand women in an industry that featured primarily men matter. Yet our comics, queer ones most of all, remain a contradiction, something like cigarette smoke, for many a reader: terrible, enchanting, dangerous, beautiful, repulsive, inspiring, evanescent, blue, the latter in more ways than one. Like such smoke, our comics can sometimes get us and those nearby killed—but, less like such smoke, our comics can also, sometimes, save a life.

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Wonder Woman was far from the only female character to star in a 20th-century comic. She was preceded by, amongst others, Betty Boop (though Betty Boop’s comics are lesser-known than her cartoons); a 1938 series featuring “Sheena, Jungle Queen”; a series strikingly like Wonder Woman in its premise called “Amazona, Mighty Woman” from 1940; and June Tarpé Mills’ 1941 *Black Fury* (later *Miss Fury*). (Mills, arguably, is the first female artist to officially create an action hero.) Wonder Woman was followed by Jean-Claude Forest’s 1962 *Barbarella* comics, Pierre Christin and Jean-Claude Mézières’ *Laureline in Valerian and Laureline* (1967), and others. Yet the Amazonian wunderkind remains perhaps the most-recognizable. She is a strange, striking tapestry of influences. Most characters, to be sure, are tapestries; characters are woven, whether their creators know it or not, from real people, fictional people, and atmospheres real or not, just as we, too, are woven from the world’s invisible threads. This is as true of Betty Boop as it is of Don Quixote, Colonel

Aureliano Buendia, or Death in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. Yet it seems especially, explicitly true of Wonder Woman.

Although Wonder Woman in her early days is not my favorite comic-book heroine of last century—my heart goes more to Laureline and to Princess Nausicaä in Hayao Miyazaki's manga of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*—she is extraordinary. Marston's early comics don't age well. Although some critics have provided intriguing readings of these texts, they are often melodramatic and ideologically blunt to the point of seeming risible, and while they provided a basic feminist message, they often stumbled elsewhere, as in panels featuring racist caricatures straight out of minstrel or anti-Semitic iconography. But in the hands of later writers and artists, she grew into a more nuanced, human character. And she's never lost her potential as a symbol of power.

That Wonder Woman's much-anticipated upcoming film—75 years after her comic debut—is both her first solo venture on the big screen and the first time a woman has directed a big-budget superhero film echoes this. There is something still revolutionary in Wonder Woman. Perhaps she truly is immortal—or the forces of inequality that led to her creation in the first place, which have lived far longer than her comics, are. Or both. Whatever the case, she still has wonder in her.

Marston certainly liked to wonder. Try to imagine, Marston wrote between 1931 and 1947 in an unpublished manuscript revealed by Jill Lepore, a future world that “may seem fantastic” in which “it becomes the usual thing instead of the exception to have women senators, women legislators, women governors, and a woman president.” If such things seem impossible, he mused, well, “so did the submarine envisaged by Jules Verne, legalized birth control . . . and equal political right for women.”

Wonder, indeed.

Gabrielle Bellot - Gabrielle Bellot is a staff writer for Literary Hub. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Tin House*, *Slate*, *Guernica*, *Huffington Post*, *The Toast*, *Lambda Literary*, *The Normal School*, *Small Axe*, *VIDA*, *Autostraddle*, the blogs of *Prairie Schooner* and *The Missouri Review*, and other places. She is working on her first novel.