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GENDERED SUPERPOWER: THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN SUPERHERO MOVIES

Abstract

Comic books and movie narratives are abundant in figures of heroic masculinity; however, the representation of heroic femininity remains questionable. On the one side, heroic femininity can be understood as empowerment, while on the other it may provide further objectification. A difficult character to interpret, the contemporary action heroine may be used for reinterpretation of the women's role, nevertheless, the danger of sexism remains. Traditional gender-role stereotyping provides very little space for reaffirmation of gender binaries; still, the recent heroines of super hero movies are capable of attracting female consumers in a typically male-dominated industry. The cinematic adaptation of the eponymous comic, *Wonder Woman* (2017), originally created as an alternative to heroic masculinity of comic books, reopens the questions of hyper-sexualisation and inherent objectification of the female body. Crucial to this paper is that the presentation of super heroines is undergoing a drastic shift which provides an opportunity for de-subordination of women in comic books and movies. Although femininity is still not celebrated in comic culture, heroines such as *The Avengers'* (2012) Black Widow and the aforementioned *Wonder Woman* to an extent defy the patriarchal values privileging men over women; their primary role is not to advance the male narrative nor are they catalysts for male-driven action. This paper will address the complexity of the representation of masculinity and femininity in superhero movies, as well as the overall role of sexuality in the comic book genre.

Key Words: Gender, Sexuality, Empowerment, Objectification, Superhero Movie

The previous decade has witnessed a profound change in superhero comics when considering the representation of female characters, particularly in connection with race and sexuality. With the increase in female characters came a rise as well in female authorship, while sexuality was given a more prominent role. More than a decade ago the last film productions with superheroines in the lead roles, *Catwoman* (2004) and *Elektra* (2005) proved to be very unsuccessful both with the audience and the critics. The subgenre of female superhero movies was heavily influenced by these failures, resulting in a long hiatus broken by *Wonder Woman* in 2017. The third most successful film of the DC Comics franchise, only lagging behind *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), (“Box Office Mojo”) *Wonder Woman* is simultaneously the embodiment of a male fantasy and the feminist agenda.

Popular culture has provided an answer to the crisis of heroism – the absence of real heroes has been compensated by the creation of fictional ones. On the margins, far away from the established aesthetics forms within the high cultures, a new brand of hero has been coined, projecting the desires, wants and repressed emotions of their target readership. New generations required new idols; hence, the 1930s saw the rise of the *superhero*.²² From the onset of comics in 1938, during the Golden Age in the fifties, including various rehabilitations and new creations in the post-war DC and Marvel comics (Silver Age – from the mid-fifties to the early seventies) until the self-reflective phase in Alan Moore and David Gibbons’ *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, the character of the superhero seemed believable. First there was Superman (Übermensch, even if not human at all), Batman (without any particular supreme physical or psychic ability, but righteous and supremely wealthy), Wonder Woman (emancipation of women required heroines), followed by the heroes of the Marvel universe: Captain America, Spider-Man, Iron Man, the Hulk, Fantastic Four and many others. Postmodern superhero sagas are reaching new dimensions on screen, as demonstrated by the Hollywood franchise perpetually re-presenting the Übermensch dream.

Yet there exists some bias regarding comics deemed suitable for analysis: Hillary Chute calls nonfiction comics, dealing with memoir, history, and journalism, “the strongest genre in the field” (Chute, 2006, p. 452); when citing examples of good fictional comics, she lists such figures as Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, and Chris Ware, who come from the auteur branch of comics (Chute, 2006, p. 459). Popular mainstream comics, represented by the two publishing behemoths DC and Marvel, seen as the homes of superheroes and spandex, tend to be conveniently disavowed in this movement for legitimacy. Douglas Wolk critiques this prevalent essentialist divide between “serious” auteur

²² The term superhero is inherently pleonastic, any hero is already *super*.

comics worthy of study and lowly popular mainstream comics, since it returns comics criticism “back to the genre-versus-medium problem again” (Wolk, 2007, p. 68). Here, Wolk is referring to the tendency of classifying comics as a genre, a critical move that constricts the range of comics to a totalizing and limiting paraliterary subcategory, as opposed to viewing comics as a medium, which accommodates the diversity of comics works as they exist and allows room for the multivalent possibilities of works created as comics. Neil Gaiman is one of the comics creators who helps to blur this biased binary. Gaiman’s graphic novel series *The Sandman*, created under the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics, was the only mainstream comic given critical attention in the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*. It is one of the graphic novel series that we intend to examine in this paper.

It’s a Bird...It’s a Plane...It’s a Comic Book

Originating from the English *strip* or German *Streifen*, literally meaning trail or belt, the word also denominates a sequence of images resembling a long belt. These images tell a story and demonstrate a certain action. Hence, a comic strip represents a single row of panels belonging together in a narrative sequence (Kukkonen, 2016, p. 169). A comic strip, a sequence of narratively connected graphic images, represents a unique melange of image and text, of literary and artistic expression. It is a hybrid form, not excluding cinematic and dramatic elements.

The comic strip in the onset existed exclusively as additional entertainment for newspaper readers (a strip of several images connected in a narrative). Nowadays, it is rarely in a form of daily newspaper strip; it has evolved into comics and graphic novel. Almost simultaneously, the comic strip’s evolution from periodicals and its independence can be recognised in the American (*comics*), French-Belgian (*bande dessinée*) and Italian (*fumetti*) tradition. However, only the union of hero stories and comic books can be distinguished as the defining factor for the creation of the new genre. The first superhero, Superman, appearing in the pages of *Action Comics*, was so successful that the term “superhero” was coined to describe an array of vigilantes following suit. Early comic books feature villains and superheroes of equal strength in the epic battle of good against evil in an attempt to mimic World War II conflicts and increase patriotic sentiment.²³

Ignored or discriminated by traditional critics for a long time, the comics developed a reputation of entertainment and leisure time, while its readers

²³ After the war, the popularity of the genre deteriorated significantly, as was visible in the decreased number of comic books published. This changed after the genre was revised.

have been distinguished as infantile escapist from harsh realities (Macdonald, 1957). However, in the consumer society of the late capitalism, popular culture, due to its vitality and creative potential, becomes an active process of dissemination of meaning and pleasure as well as a possible threat to the current social order. On the other hand, popular pleasures are being submitted to a wide range of disciplinary and repressive measures or strategies of apprehension which transform the aforementioned pleasures into socially acceptable and disciplined practices (Fisk, 2001).

Perhaps the most distinguished example of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), comics are heavily invested in transmedia storytelling (exporting stories into other media²⁴). Comic book movie adaptation has today developed into its own genre, comic book movie. The beginning of the millennium saw the rebirth of this genre, ignited by the post-9/11 sentiments and enabled by the advances in computer animation and 3D modelling. Computer generated animation presents an appropriate element for the hybridity of the genre and narrative.

The primary focus of superhero comic book movie is on the protagonist, as indicated in the eponymous title; however, we need to first distinguish characteristics which set the superhero(ine) apart from the more typical protagonist. The Superhero(ine) is more than a sum of his or her abilities. According to Peter Coogan (2013), the superhero must obey three conventions of the genre. First, (s)he is on a heroic mission to fight evil and save the innocent without being selfish. Second, the superhero(ine) is in possession of particular superpowers that separate them from ordinary people. Finally, the duality of the identity of the superhero(ine) is presented through the existence of a codename (Batman) and alter-ego (Bruce Wayne) (2013, p.4-9). Jennings, on the other hand, focuses on the “hyper-physical body” of the superhero functioning as a symbol of strength, courage and selflessness (2013, p. 59). Their superbodies set them apart from the ordinary people while connoting images of “balance justice, goodness, strength, power, and perfection” (Jennings 2013, p. 61).

The superhuman women and men represent the embodiment of hegemonic social standards and have the power to influence the (young) readers’ perceptions of gender. In a tight costume, revealing a voluptuous body, the hyper-sexualised superheroine reproduces social constructions of desirability and power. The appropriateness of hegemonic femininity and masculinity is emphasised in superhero comic books (and, consequently, in comic book movies): male superheroes are strong and muscular, while the female, although strong,

²⁴ One of the most notable examples being Superman whose comic book life begun in 1938, and who, within two years of its existence, saw film series, a radio show and a range of toys emerge.

appear lean and feminine. The superheroine is often portrayed in tight, revealing clothing in order to accentuate her femininity, attract the (male) gaze and avoid masculinisation. For the superheroine, although they offer a much more physically capable picture of a woman in comparison to the female victim, they are also presented as hypersexualised in order to balance their masculine traits of physical capabilities. Furthermore, the two-dimensional representation of both male and female characters relies on the notion that women are helpless without men.

The two-dimensional representation of the characters in contemporary film production often relies on the exploration of female characters' sexuality. Providing a framework for understanding the consequences of being female in a culture keen on objectifying women, objectification theory can be applied when analysing the media that encourages women to objectify themselves and define their value solely on physical appearance. Whenever a woman's body, body parts or bodily functions are separated from her person, reduced to the status of instrument or equated with her, in public or private interactions, she is exposed to sexual objectification (Frederickson and Roberts, 1997). In superhero movies, sexual objectification of the body, both of the superheroine and of the victim, is central to their identities.

The Superhero Secretary

The superhero narrative is mostly a patriarchal one; when women are included, they tend to be embodying victims in need of rescuing. With their physical appearance in the primary focus, the hypersexualised female characters' crucial roles are fortification of gender roles and providing motivation for the superhero's actions. Fragile, docile and sexually appealing young woman (Mary Jane to Spider-Man, the epitome of the damsel-in-distress who constantly needs saving) is one of the most important archetypes in comic book culture, meant to support hegemonic masculinity. Even though she is the embodiment of female empowerment (Finn, 2013, p. 7), Wonder Woman is still a result of a very narrow gender script.

Not all fictional superheroes are men. Wonder Woman, created in 1941 by Harvard psychologist, William Moulton Marston (Hanley, 2014, p. x), was not the world's first superheroine, but is the only one that has been written continuously since her creation.²⁵ Preceding Wonder Woman by almost two years, Fantomah first appeared in *Jungle Comics* in 1940 (Bartlett, 2012, p. 120). "The most remarkable woman ever known," Fantomah was a striking

²⁵ Wonder woman has been written continuously since the first comic book came out. Only two other superheroes, Superman and Batman, have shared her fate (Hanley, 2014, p. 91).

blond protector of the forest, who, when angered, transformed into a frightening skull-faced monster who would assassinate opponents. Even Fantomah was preceded by the Woman in Red, the first female crime fighter, however, the Woman in Red possessed no superpowers or exceptional equipment, hence, cannot be considered a superheroine.²⁶

In a star-spangled skirt and a red top, Wonder Woman is the embodiment of a heterosexual feminine icon. With long dark hair and a voluptuous body, the princess's origin story began in *All Star Comics* #8 in December 1941 with an American war pilot landing onto Paradise Island where the mythical Amazons resided, far away from the aggressive world of men. Sculpted out of clay by Queen Hippolyte and given life by the gods, the baby daughter was named Diana. Rescued by Diana, Steve is taken to the Amazons' hospital, however, since men were not allowed on the island he had to be returned to America. It was then decided that a warrior would have to follow him, as "America, the last citadel of democracy and of equal rights for women" was in danger (Hanley, 2014, p. 14). Upon leaving the island, Princess Diana of Paradise Island became Wonder Woman, chose an outfit that distinguished her as a friend of America and adopted the alternative identity of Diana Prince.

Originally, Wonder Woman's own creation through an independent act by her mother, who made her from clay without any involvement from a man, echoes continuing feminist concerns about the importance of women's freedom to make choices about their reproductive rights. Never needing a man to rescue her, Wonder Woman invokes the postfeminist notion of "having it all". However, her lack of concern for women's rights in the early versions of the comic, as Finn claims, prevents her from being a feminist superhero while her sisters' and her fair skin reinforces racism by omitting minority characters (2013, p. 15).

Where Wonder Woman stood as a representative of girl-power in comic books, the movie allows only heterosexual and patriarchal readings, as she is made the daughter of Zeus. No longer born and created by a woman, brave and righteous Hippolyte, Wonder Woman is deprived of a key feminist trait, the issue of ownership over the female body. The cultural changes that were introduced by Marston and which provided the opportunity to radically challenge patriarchal assumptions were withheld from the viewers when Wonder Woman was made compliant to a tyrannical Greek God. Even though this paper provides examples of other, more or less successful heroines who attempt

²⁶ Unlike Batman who, even though he possesses no superpowers, unless we consider supreme tactical abilities and martial arts skills super powers, owns exceptional equipment granting him that status. Batman is also one of the few superheroes granted the privilege to age and suffer serious injuries.

to question gender roles and patriarchy, Wonder Woman initially rejects patriarchal norms only to restore them in the movie.

Establishing an alternative identity as Steve's nurse and secretary, Diana Prince would turn into Wonder Woman whenever danger arose. However, whenever she was wrapped in chains by a man, she would become impotent which is a vulnerability that references bondage. Ranging from feminist to female stereotypes, the interpretations of Wonder Woman focus specifically on the interplay of bondage and emancipation. Marston argued that showing the character breaking free of chains was intended as an inspiration for women; however, others saw it as perversion (Frank, 1944). Dressed in the pornographic style of the 1940s and tied down, Wonder Woman was seen as an assertion of male dominance not only in the superhero universe, but in the entire medium of comics.

More recently, several comics have attempted to offer a celebration of female power and appeal to readers of that gender. Within the superhero genre, the new Ms. Marvel is the embodiment of multiplicity of meanings, since Kamala Khan is the first Pakistani-American superhero of the Marvel Universe. The sixteen-year-old Muslim superheroine written by Wilson as a symbol of the complexity of identities in today's America has a profound potential of becoming a powerful feminist text, particularly if considering the universality of the teen experience. Created in 2013 and with her own title since February 2014, the new Ms. Marvel portrays racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. In Issue# 12 Ms. Marvel visits her family in Kardachi, Pakistan, and realises her heroism is needed there. Without a costume ready, she has to improvise in a blue dress, red leggings and a scarf which could represent both a niqab and a hijab.



Image 1. Ms. Marvel without her superhero costume (Wilson, 2016).

The costume, together with the superpower, represents the “substance” of being a superhero (Dudenhoeffer, 2017, p. 4). In order to assume a distinctive identity, the superhero(ine) should adopt a codename (Ms. Marvel) and a costume representing his/her mission and cultural origin, announcing belonging in the superhero community. The previous Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers, adopts the codename Captain Marvel which enables Kamala Khan to embrace the alterego of Ms. Marvel. However, the predecessor’s black leotard costume is replaced by a more modest attire consisting of a purple burkini (in respect of her religious beliefs and cultural upbringing), red pants, red scarf and a golden bracelet (representing her Pakistani heritage). Kamala Khan does not change her hair nor skin colour, even though she initially, in a typically adolescent fashion, plans to, to alter her appearance in accordance with the Western ideals of beauty.

Save the Cheerleader, Save the World!

The marginality of female characters in major roles in superhero movies appears rather persistent despite the growing demand for strong and versatile female portrayals from the audiences: one only needs to surf around the web and social media blogging sites such as Tumblr to come across posts demanding stand-alone feature movies for female comic book characters such as Ms. Marvel and Black Widow (for example, whereismyblackwidowmovie.tumblr.com). Still, it appears that, even though the narratives are more diverse in regard to race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality remain underrepresented (Stabile, 2009). As Stabile recognises, the main premise of the superhero comics is that someone is in danger and needs to be saved, the one in danger is female or feminised, while the saviour is masculine (2009, p. 87). Weak and vulnerable, women, even when superheroes, still need to be protected from malevolent male characters. Primarily used as a narrative propeller, the violence against women, through torture, rape or death, demonstrates the binary dichotomy of the interplay between gender roles and power.

The first season of the TV series *Heroes* (2006-2010) was promoted under the tag line “Save the Cheerleader, Save the World”. This line is a reference to the fate of one of the leading superheroes of the series, Claire Bennett, whose superpower is immortality and the ability to heal herself, but who has no ability of self-defence. Surrounded by a number of protectors, the cheerleader’s survival is the driving force behind the narrative; however, it depends entirely on male defenders. In one of the most violent scenes on TV, the villainous superhero Sylar opens Claire Bennett’s skull and consumes her brain while the teenager can only passively observe the cannibalistic act. Consuming the

opponents' brains enables Sylar to acquire their superpower but is also a narrative device propelling the patriarchal narrative.

Rape, torture and death motivate superheroes, while disempowerment (and disembodiment) of female characters, even superheroines, is a device used to shock the audience. Apart from shock, it can provide motivation for the superheroine's revenge and be used as the driving force of a *superman's* rage (Stuller, 2010). The most persistent of all superhero comic book tropes, women's disempowerment is an illustration of the gendered role of power. The female passivity and vulnerability are also used as the reason and justification for the protector's acts of violence. Many efforts to depict women as superheroes, or simply heroes, have failed due to the patriarchal narrative of gendered protection and the need to recycle sexist stereotypes in order not to offend the profit-driven world of television (Stabile, 2009, p. 88).

Gail Simone, who has written, among many other comic titles, *Birds of Prey* and *Wonder Woman*, coined the phrase "Women in Refrigerators" in 1999 (Simone, 1999). The phrase is derived from a memorable event in *Green Lantern* #54 from 1994, in which Major Force kills and dismembers Alexandra de Witt and assembles her remains in the refrigerator. Her boyfriend, the Green Lantern, comes home to find her body parts there, which motivates his revenge. However, de Witt's death ultimately proves to be insignificant and pointless, as the Green Lantern rings run out of power and his promise to kill Major Force is unaccomplished. In 1999, Simone developed an eponymous website (<https://www.lby3.com/wir/>) which chronicles the fate of superheroines in the form of rape, disempowerment, dismemberment, death and other violent actions used as plot devices. The site, a quantitative research into gender and representation in comics, lists over a hundred female comic book characters who suffered a violent fate in order to propel a male character's narrative, and the list is continually being revised.

Not a Damsel in Distress

The main female character in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Catwoman comes from an underprivileged background and sympathises with those coming from similar circumstances, as seen, for example, in a scene where she defends a young boy who stole an apple from a group of grown men. An anti-pode to Bruce Wayne, whose wealth ensures his superhero status, she is living in a crammed apartment in a less than wealthy part of town and targets the affluent citizens. Catwoman's physical appearance, long reddish brown hair and a slim physique, is a representation of the Western ideal of beauty. As Grogan claims, slender body types are idealised (2007, p. 9), a claim which seems to be

reinforced by Catwoman's costume accentuating her slender figure, it is black, tight and close-fitting. Her behaviour when first introduced to Bruce Wayne echoes a similar principle, one of the ideal feminine behaviour (Walter, 2010).

Impersonating a maid at Bruce Wayne's mansion in order to break into his safe, Catwoman speaks very quietly avoiding eye contact, while her body posture indicates weakness and insecurity. During a party she is discovered by Bruce Wayne in one of his private chambers, where she pretends she stumbled by accident. However, Batman laments that the pearl necklace she is wearing unmistakably resembles his late mother's pearls which were in his "uncrackable" safe. Commenting that she was not told it was uncrackable, her entire demeanour changes, she no longer appears weak or insecure, but seems more relaxed and confident.

The main role of Catwoman is to provide a romantic interest for Batman. Even though it might initially seem that she has her own agenda, one separate from Batman's, the only way to achieve her goals is with his assistance; hence, her future relies on aligning with a man. Catwoman's narrative follows a traditional pattern of romance narratives, even though she was capable of providing for herself in the past (more or less successfully, since the underlying message is that she is trouble because there was no male guidance) she still needs a man to save her.

A more complex character than might seem on the surface, Catwoman's representation when it comes to her visual appearance and narrative background illustrate the traditional patriarchal image of femininity and the ideal of beauty. *The Dark Knight Rises* does attempt to address the complexity of the female/feminine identity dichotomy in superhero movies; Catwoman is more complex than a typical one-dimensional hero/villain. Not a typical damsel in distress, Catwoman does not passively wait to be rescued; however, her development is limited by patriarchal ideology.

One of the criteria that can be used for determining the patriarchal influence on popular culture is the *Bechdel test*. In *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985) by Alison Bechdel, two female characters are thinking about going to the cinema, and one of them says that she only goes to see movies that satisfy three requirements: to have at least two women in it, who talk to each other, about something besides a man; hence, the last movie she saw was *Alien* (Bechdel, 1985). Originally intended as a striking punch line about gender roles in Hollywood film production, the *Bechdel test* has provided inspiration for a debate on the role of women in popular culture.

The Dark Knight Rises (2012), as well as the vast majority of superhero movies, does very poorly in terms of the *Bechdel test*. Even though Catwoman does exchange a few lines with her unnamed roommate, it is too short to be

considered a conversation. The only other more prominent female character, Miranda Tate, never interacts with Catwoman, even though they share several scenes. Unlike *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *Wonder Woman* (2017) satisfies the three requirements, however, it needs to be stressed that the success refers to the Themyscira period of the movie, where Diana's life is abundant in female relationships. Once she leaves the mythical world, there is only one female character in her life, Etta Candy. Used as a comic relief in the narrative, Etta does not communicate with Wonder Woman, nor go on adventures with male characters, which only Wonder Woman is worthy of doing.

Marvel Universe's Black Widow, similar to Catwoman, is dressed in black tight leather, in a costume appealing to "men's sexual domination fantasies" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 274). Superheroines are highly sexualised and portrayed stereotypically in an attempt to attract (and keep) the male gaze. Although she is given agency, an armoured Black Widow maintains a very visually feminine appeal. In *The Avengers* and *Captain America* series, this superheroine attempts to explore what it means to be a woman and an action hero, however, she succeeds mostly at being a seductive female in a male-dominated society.

A former KGB spy, Natasha Romanoff, is cast mainly as a helper, however, she does show agency at times. For example, in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), when necessary Natasha takes initiative and leadership position, while Captain America, Steve, accepts her orders. While helping Captain America on his mission to destroy enemy organisation Hydra and on the run from their former employers, Natasha demonstrates her ability to quickly adapt to the surroundings. Instead of the direct conflict Steve would prefer, the Black Widow helps Captain America integrate into the crowd at the shopping mall. Although she represents a strong, capable woman, Black Widow's role is that of a helper to the male protagonist and "eye-candy" to the male gaze, indicating gender stereotyping.

Depictions of Female Sexuality in Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*

In this section, we examine depictions of female sexuality in one of Neil Gaiman's major works: the iconic graphic novel series *The Sandman*. We draw on Edward Said's *Orientalism* in order to examine how Gaiman navigates the problematic issues of representation of female sexuality in his graphic novel series. *The Sandman* was instrumental in revolutionizing the quality of writing in mainstream comics. Douglas Wolk is critical of the *nostalgie de la boue* amongst both the auteur comics and the mainstream comics: the tendency of otherwise excellent contemporary comics creators to have "picked up their

visual vocabulary from the crap and hackwork of the past [resulting in being] unhealthily attached to it in a sentimental, self-loathing way, as a curdled by-product of the attachment they felt to it as children” (Wolk, 2007, pp. 68-69). According to Wolk, amongst mainstream comics, *nostalgie de la boue* manifests itself through “forgotten Golden Age characters being trotted out again and integrated into the tapestry of continuity” as well as “retroactive continuity” (Wolk, 2007, p. 69). What Wolk forgets is that the writers of the British Invasion of the 1980s often began their comics career by being given by the comics publishing houses old and obscure comics characters, so that these creators may be accused of participating in the *nostalgie de la boue*, and then revamping and re-imagining the characters and the series into something greater than the original material. As an example, Gaiman revived and completely transformed the character of the Sandman, a superhero from a 1970s comic by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (Allen, 2004, p. 228), into the series that Delany calls “far and above the most inventive and most human comic of the decade” (Delany, 1999, p. 364). The series received accolades from Norman Mailer, Stephen King, and Clive Barker, and won the top awards in comics: of the Eisner awards, Gaiman won Best Writer in 1991, 1992, 1993, and 1994, *The Sandman* won Best Continuing Series in 1991, 1992, and 1993, Best Reprint Graphic Album in 1991, and Best New Graphic Album in 1993; and of the Harveys, Gaiman won Best Writer in 1990 and 1991, with *The Sandman* winning Best Continuing Series in 1992 (Bender, 1999, pp. 260-61). Possibly the most notable of the awards *The Sandman* has won is the 1991 World Fantasy Awards for Best Short Story for issue #19 “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” thus becoming the first monthly comic to win a literary award (Bender, 1999, p. 260).

Edward Said demonstrates that the myth of Oriental sexuality, particularly the figure of the lustful Oriental seductress, is an integral aspect of Orientalism and the language justifying empire. Said discusses the images of Oriental sexuality: they include not only the litany of clichés such as “harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys,” but also represent “the freedom of licentious sex” outside Western societal norms (Said, 1979, p. 190). The Oriental sexual appetite is “an undifferentiated sexual drive,” but is paradoxically also passive, and must be “ravished and won by the Orientalist hero” — in short, it is a “sexuality [that] must never be taken seriously” (Said, 1979, p. 311). Said identifies Gustave Flaubert’s mistress Kuchuk Hanem, “a famous Egyptian dancer and courtesan,” as the woman who embodied for the writer the sexual stereotypes that he himself would also perpetrate: to Flaubert, she was “Less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity,” existing as an “occasion and an opportunity for Flaubert’s musings” (Said, 1979, p. 186-187).

The ancient Egyptian goddess Bast is associated with “female fertility, sexuality, and the protection of pregnant women and infants,” while her lioness aspect, Sekhmet, is conversely associated with “war, pestilence, and illness” (De Jong, 2002, p. 123). Although Bast is the goddess of sexuality, she does not need to embody the Oriental sexual stereotype: in *The Sandman*, her sexuality has agency, empowered by the position of respect that the Egyptian gods are afforded in Gaiman’s reworked graphic novel. It would seem that Gaiman’s Bast is somewhat tamed, for in Gaiman’s comic series she appears without her fiercer aspect Sekhmet, the negative and warlike persona, whose presence is completely elided. In *Season of Mists*, Bast is incarnated as a cat-headed and bare-breasted woman who, after arriving alongside Anubis, appears to mutely endure the Norse god Thor’s crude advancements: “D’you want to play with my hammer? Eh, Miss Pussy-Head? It’s called Mjollnir. If I rub it, it gets bigger. S’ttrue” (Gaiman, 1992, p. 145). Her companion Bes appears to be protecting her; etymologically, ‘Bes’ is derived from “to guard,” and “protect” (Malaise, 2002, p. 29). In the following issue, however, Bast reveals herself to be independent and strong-minded. She easily fends Thor off with her claws and reveals herself to be the true diplomat from the Egyptian delegation who will be negotiating with Dream for the possession of Hell. When Bast arranges for a private appointment with Dream, the overtone of her language is suggestive: “We must talk in private. You have something that we want. Very badly. And we have something you desire” (Gaiman, 1992, p. 152). Her dialogue is placed over a panel depicting two demons from a separate delegation in a passionate embrace. Bast offers information about Dream’s prodigal brother, Destruction; she does so in a coy and flirtatious manner: “I have something you want,” she says in a panel that portrays three quarters of her body in profile (Gaiman, 1992, p. 161). Bast is partially bluffing, something Dream only discovers in a different story arc after Hell has been given to the angels to run. Dream meets her in a dream, recreating her city Bubastis for their rendezvous. Throughout their palaver, Bast is coquettish and witty, speaking in what Gaiman calls “a kind of poetic formality” (Bender, 1999, p. 172):

Let me see, I suppose it is possible that today you thought to yourself: ‘Why, it has been two years since last I saw Lady Bast, and too long before that. It has been far too long since we sat beneath the summer moon together and talked of pleasant fripperies, of that and of this, and left others to speak sensible things of import and consequence. I shall rectify this on a moment.’ And suiting the thought to the deed, you sought me out. (Gaiman, 1993, p. 142)

Bast sprawls sensually, threatening Dream with the suggestion of becoming lovers, although she makes it clear she is teasing and admits she does not know

the exact location of Destruction. Given the tragic end of all of Dream's love affairs, recurring through *The Sandman*, Bast is wise not to get involved with him. Although Bast is in decline for lack of worshipers, she remains within her temple and is never without dignity: she can still answer the rare prayer and summon power to attend Dream's wake (Gaiman, 1993, p. 145; Gaiman, 1996, p. 35).

In *The Sandman*, it is also problematic that Gaiman places other female Middle Eastern deities in the sex industry. The Dancing Woman, a.k.a. the goddess Ishtar/Astarte/Belili, works as a stripper — a truly “exotic dancer” — and was once the lover of Destruction. A war goddess whose origins include Mesopotamia and Egypt, Ishtar appears as “a beautiful seductive woman,” depicted in Egyptian art as naked, armed, and either on horseback or in chariot — an unusually aggressive figure, given that “Egyptian goddesses were not usually shown naked, and Egyptian women never rode horses” (Pinch, 2002, p. 108). During her appearance, Ishtar is mature and caring, looking after a sick scatterbrained stripper who goes by the stage name “Tiffany.” After Dream and Delirium meet her at her workplace, Ishtar dances her “swan dance” that ends up destroying the strip club. Gaiman chooses to portray Ishtar in this manner because the strip club experience “struck [him] as a shadow of genuine sensuality; a sort of falling away from something much deeper and more mysterious” (Bender, 1999, p. 171). The ambiguous dynamics of power and exploitation are exposed: Nancy, one of the other strippers, has an M.A. in women's studies — a seeming paradox, but the stripping is convenient for her, and she intends to write a memoir about her work, and go on Donahue and Oprah. Nancy relates what she remembers from her professors about the goddess Ishtar and temple prostitution: “One of our professors, she said that sacred prostitution is something that only evolves in matriarchies — men are so terrified of female sexuality that they have to repress it, or regulate it — which is where we come in” (Gaiman, 1993, p. 118). Earlier, Ishtar remarks that the men come to strip clubs to see body parts, pretty faces, and nice hair in that order, “But they don't come to see us dance. And they don't want to see me dancing for real” (Gaiman, 1993, p. 113). Ishtar's kamikaze last dance is the combination and apotheosis of her divine aspects of sexuality and violence in a moment of empowerment in the midst of exploitation. She dances “for real,” and the sublime moment of ineffable revelation, as in “Façade,” must end in destruction. Ishtar's tragic and triumphant moment ultimately affirms the existence of the epic absolutes despite the degradation of the present.

Conclusion

In comic books and movies heroes often get new suits, origin stories are re-told, the space-time continuum alters, and sometimes a new hero takes up a mantle in place of someone else. Comic book industry is first and foremost an industry, and editors, writers, and artists are constantly coming up with new and sometimes controversial material to increase sales. TV series and movies serve as cultural revelations, reflecting the society that produces them. The success of Sandman, Ms. Marvel, and Wonder Woman indicate a wider and more diverse readership. The last decade has seen comic book industry geared towards women and minorities as new audiences, and have changed some twenty titles to reflect a more diverse cast of characters. Nevertheless, the primary role of superheroines in film is that of a fantasy for the (male) audience.

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RODNO ODREĐENE SUPERMOĆI: PREDSTAVLJANJE RODA I SEKSUALNOSTI U FILMOVIMA O SUPERJUNACIMA

Sažetak

Stripovi i njihove filmske adaptacije obiluju likovima herojske muževnosti; međutim, predstavljanje herojske ženstvenosti ostaje upitno. S jedne strane, može se shvatiti kao osnaživanje, dok s druge predstavlja dodatnu objektifikaciju. Komplikiran lik za interpretaciju, savremena akciona junakinja može se koristiti za reinterpretaciju uloge žene, međutim, opasnost od seksizma ostaje. Tradicionalno stereotipiziranje po rodnom ulogu ostavlja malo prostora za reafirmaciju rodni binarnosti; ipak, skorašnje junakinje filmova o superherojima sposobne su za privlačenje konzumentica u industriji kojom tipično dominiraju muškarci. Filmska adaptacija istoimenog stripa, *Čudesna žena* (2017), prvobitno stvorena kao alternativa herojskoj muževnosti stripova, ponovno otvara pitanja o hiper-seksualnosti i prirođenoj objektifikaciji ženskog tijela. Ključno za ovaj rad je da predstavljanje superjunakinje prolazi kroz korjenite promjene koje omogućavaju de-subordinaciju žena u stripovima i filmovima. Mada se ženstvenost još uvijek ne slavi u strip kulturi, junakinje kao što su Crna udovica *Osvetnika* (2012) i već spomenuta *Čudesna žena* donekle prkose patrijarhalnim vrijednostima koji privilegiraju muškarce naspram žena; njihova osnovna uloga nije poticanje pripovijesti o muškarcima niti su katalist radnje koju pokreću muškarci. Ovaj rad će se baviti kompleksnošću predstavljanja muževnosti i ženstvenosti u filmovima o superjunacima, kao i ulogom seksualnosti u stripu kao žanru.

Ključne riječi: rod, seksualnost, osnaživanje, objektifikacija, filmovi o superjunacima