



Breaking the (Clay) Mold: on Wonder Woman's Matriarchal Birth

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Breaking the (Clay) Mold: On Wonder Woman's Matriarchal Birth

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Abstract

In 2011, DC Comics reset their entire publication line with *The New 52*, wherein titles were reimagined with new costumes, plotlines, and characters. For Wonder Woman, *The New 52* introduced the unexpected revelation that her once-matriarchal birth now retroactively included a father in Zeus, King of the Gods. This thesis contends that while change is a necessity in order for comic books to span decades while retaining their relevance, some changes—those that fundamentally alter or display misunderstanding of a character—cause long-term damage to that character’s legacy. It argues that the erasure of Wonder Woman’s matriarchal origin should be viewed as woefully antithetical to the principles of the character as established by her creator, William Moulton Marston, and—in contrast to her decades-long history—asks us to see her power as part of and stemming from patriarchy. From close readings of several runs under different writers—William Moulton Marston, George Pérez, Brian Azzarello, and Grant Morrison—this thesis considers Wonder Woman’s rebooted origin alongside the overall marginalization of femininity within her rebooted story to demonstrate how *The New 52* disturbs the strength and depth of the character’s overall influence on our collective culture. Finally, it takes key learnings from each run to offer positive ideas on how future writers can bring Wonder Woman into the 21st century.

Dedication

For my parents, to whom I owe everything. Any opportunities afforded me are only because of their sacrifices and the difficult choices they made to leave their beloved Lebanon.

And for my husband—my source of laughter and moral support. Thanks for picking up all that take-out.

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Chapter I.

Introduction: Reboots, Rebirths, and Relevance

Over the course of the last several decades, comic books have seen an evolution in their reputation. Once considered a juvenile or unrefined form of entertainment aimed mostly at children, comic books now comprise many different genres of story-telling and, thanks largely to works by Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and others, have come to be viewed as respectable works of literature worthy of study. Emerging from this more elevated status is a “superhero boom” in entertainment media and film, with DC Comics being an especially hot property, and one character in particular—Wonder Woman—had a banner year in 2017 with the release of her first solo movie. While superhero comics in general and Wonder Woman specifically has been the focus of much scholarly analysis and critique—particularly in terms of her feminist roots—one relatively recent development in her character’s storyline begs specific attention: her altered origin as seen in DC’s 2011 reboot event, *The New 52*. This paper seeks to examine and discuss the erasure of Wonder Woman’s matriarchal origin as a result of *The New 52*, which continues to inform both Wonder Woman’s character and influence her legion of fans today.

Despite Wonder Woman’s prominence as a figure of female empowerment, in 2011, the character’s origin was retroactively changed. Originally written in 1942’s *Wonder Woman #1* as a type of parthenogenetic birth with no male involvement, the first issue of *The New 52*’s rebooted Wonder Woman title suddenly revealed Diana to have a

father, the direct result being that her inherently feminine—if not outright *feminist*—creation was annulled. I seek to reveal the underlying implications of Wonder Woman’s revised origin story—how this one specific change in her decades-long history affects her narrative identity, and from that, her relevance as a character within our culture today. To do so, this thesis seeks to address several concepts: the importance of authorial intent; the source of Wonder Woman’s power in her various narratives (including “male” versus “female” power) and how it changes with different versions of her birth; and finally, consider what greater social commentary is ultimately added to or removed from the collective public discussion by looking at several runs of the *Wonder Woman* title. I will lead you through a conversation outlining the history and objectives behind Wonder Woman’s development by her creator, William Moulton Marston. I will also offer examples of what I consider to be anemic interpretations of Wonder Woman and explain why those takes, despite their popularity or sales numbers, effectively lose the soul of the character and her message. Lastly, I will offer some ideas on how I believe Wonder Woman’s story can move forward while maintaining her cultural relevance.

Comic books are a unique form of storytelling in that, because of their serialized nature and the longevity of their characters, change becomes a necessity. That change, at times, can and must be abrupt in order to keep characters relevant to the period in which they are written. For instance, the Captain America character created in the 1940s still exists; however, given the nature of the era in which he was created, if a writer were to continue to write him as originally envisioned—within the repeated narrative of World War II combat, issue after issue—he may no longer be as provocative to a modern audience or as stimulating to the social consciousness. As such, in the 1960s, Marvel

Comics changed the story in which the character operated—Captain America was brought out of the 1940s and into what was then the current time period, the backstory being that he had gone missing and was found preserved in ice after decades (see *The Avengers Vol. 1, #4*). Yet, he was still the same character fundamentally—still a patriot and Super Soldier, meant to exemplify American values and the fight against evil—but was now employed to fight contemporary supervillains in place of his original wartime enemies. The core of his character in symbolizing the quest for American ideals remained intact, while the narrative context around him changed to that of a man living out of his own time. A change such as this is superficial in nature—it exists to broaden Captain America’s overall story and further develop his character, keeping him fresh and providing new storytelling opportunities, but without altering the fundamental meaning behind his creation or what he represents.

DC Comics, in contrast, has taken its own distinctive approaches to narrative and continuity editing in the past. While they have, at times, updated some of their characters in manners similar to that of Marvel Comics—for instance, adjusting Batman’s main cast with the introduction of Dick Grayson, who becomes his ward and sidekick, Robin—DC also has a history of making sweeping, line-wide changes to their overall narrative universe and dubbing them “reboots.” The first and most impactful reboot was the 1986 event, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. To revitalize characters worn thin by stagnant narratives no longer fitting the time, and to clear up much narrative confusion that had accumulated over decades of publication and story changes, DC rid themselves of their “multiverse”—a universe of multiple earths with different versions of characters hailing from each. Instead, there became one shared universe, and DC used this to kill off or erase many

previously existing characters, resulting in “pre-*Crisis*” and “post-*Crisis*” story eras. Some flagship titles, including *Wonder Woman*, started over from scratch, and the character was re-introduced as though her story was being told for the first time.

In 2011, DC Comics again rebooted their universe, creating what they labelled *The New 52*—a set of 52 new comic book series, featuring new stories and new versions of their classic characters. In the rebooted *Action Comics* title, Superman—a previously well-established character, deep into his career and long since married to Lois Lane—was now younger and brought back to his early days when Metropolis was discovering Superman for the first time. Meanwhile, what the reboot entailed for Wonder Woman—alongside a new silver costume and a change in supporting characters—went deeper to include a “retconned” origin story. In her original incarnation, Diana is a princess from an all-female island of Amazons. Because only women reside on the island, the Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta,¹ has no means of conceiving the child for which she desperately yearns. She sculpts a baby from clay, which Aphrodite blesses and gives life (see *Wonder Woman Vol. 1*). This is a wholly matriarchal birth, set within a matriarchal society, with no male influence or father figure involved. However, in *The New 52*, Wonder Woman is no longer born of clay—in fact, this origin never occurred in the first place, and is revealed to be a lie told by Queen Hippolyta to cover her love affair with Zeus, King of the Gods (see *Wonder Woman Vol. 4, #3*). Setting aside the added corruption of Wonder Woman as a paragon of truth (distorting her birth with a lie), Wonder Woman’s origin, then, changed from a fundamentally feminine and matriarchal

¹ Spellings of the Queen’s name vary depending on era and writer; Marston favored “Hippolyte,” while George Pérez changed it to “Hippolyta.” For the sake of clarity and consistency, this paper will employ the current —a ending throughout.

one to one not only startlingly patriarchal, but that alters her character and purpose in a profound way, as this thesis will show.

Further still within *The New 52* are other all-encompassing story changes that convert Wonder Woman into a nearly unrecognizable character; the most heinous of which are those that deny her intrinsic femininity. Not only is Diana made a demi-goddess with an all-powerful father, but the comic additionally finds her stripped of the support of her Amazon sisters, who, with the revelation of her birth, come to view her as not a true Amazon and ostracize her (see *Wonder Woman Vol. 4*). Within the course of some thirty-odd issues, Diana is faced with a new family of in-fighting, dysfunctional Greek gods; she kills Ares to become the violent, masculine God of War (the direct opposite of her original purpose as a champion of peace); is saddled into a romantic relationship with Superman in the *Justice League* title; and more. While these changes to Wonder Woman's setting may appear to be the typical melodramatic leanings of comic books, I maintain that they ought to be considered seriously, as they have deep-rooted and lasting effects on the character and her relevance to society when measured alongside her patriarchal *New 52* origin. As both a feminine character and a powerful character, it is no surprise that when contemplating the power of women, many see Wonder Woman as a symbol—she is both a female icon and a feminist one. Yet, Wonder Woman's *New 52* origin is written in such a manner that it targets and nullifies Wonder Woman's femininity as being superfluous or disposable, falling in direct conflict of everything Wonder Woman was created to convey.

From this basis, I seek to illustrate the correlation between Wonder Woman's femininity in the comics informing her power and identity, and that ultimately, any

changes to this principle affects her characterization and her status as a social symbol. By operating under the concept that a cornerstone of feminism is the power found in sisterhood,² and coupling this idea with the comic book's deliberate setting in a utopia of Amazons, I assert that Wonder Woman's matriarchal birth is at the essence of Diana's very identity (Brownmiller 230). Although some readers have argued that by giving Wonder Woman a father of the king-god archetype, she in turn is empowered (having become a demi-god), I shall argue the contrary: that by forcing fatherhood into Wonder Woman's origin, any physical power gained by Wonder Woman is rendered superficial if it comes at the expense of her core identity, in which her femininity is either erased or employed to represent and uphold a patriarchal system.

One notable scholar aware of the many edits made to Wonder Woman's character over her history is Joseph Darowski, who, in 2014, released his *Ages of Wonder Woman* essay collection, cataloguing various periods of her publication and storylines. Darowski supports the idea that while change is an incontrovertible part of comic books, for Wonder Woman specifically, her history of changes results in a "nebulous identity" that is "more pronounced and problematic" with each revision (1). To offer examples of some of these problematic effects, this thesis will review and outline her original 1940s origin as compared to *The New 52*; I will also provide a close reading of what I believe to be an ideal depiction of her origin post-*Crisis* as written by George Pérez, which re-imagined Wonder Woman's birth for the first time (while keeping it decidedly matriarchal); lastly, we will consider Greg Rucka's post-*New 52* "Rebirth" *Wonder*

² While this idea dates back to the very beginning of the quest for women's suffrage in America and still persists within the ideology of modern-day feminists, it was a particularly notable tenet of the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s. See Brownmiller's article for a more intimate, first-hand look.

Woman as a means for resolution and a model for keeping Wonder Woman relevant to the 21st century.

If, as scholars say, Wonder Woman has historically been a product of each era of her writing, it is important to determine what her recent characterization says about our society and culture today. In other words, why and how do these changes to Wonder Woman's narrative matter, particularly now? When millions of women across the United States and around the world are marching for their human rights and making their voices heard; when the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements are shaping discussions in media and entertainment; when the highest-grossing superhero origin movie³ and highest-grossing DC movie⁴ was none other than *Wonder Woman*,⁵ the idea of this prominent female icon being undermined in her power, misunderstood, or misrepresented in her message warrants academic attention. Wonder Woman has always been a reflection of or counter-message to society, and—with a few *more appropriate* changes—she can remain so even more effectively today.

³ At the time of debut: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2017/11/02/wonder-woman-is-officially-the-highest-grossing-superhero-origin-film/#5415cf46ebd9>

⁴ In DC film continuity post-Chrisopher Nolan's Dark Knight series: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=dccomics.htm>

⁵ As of this writing, it is still the highest-grossing female-directed film: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/wonder-woman-highest-worldwide-gross-female-director>

Chapter II.

William Moulton Marston, Masculinity, and Matriarchy

When noted psychologist William Moulton Marston created Wonder Woman in 1941, he stated his intentions clearly: “Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world” (qtd. in Daniels 26). Marston’s support of the feminist movement is well-documented among historians, but one of the first and most thorough of his biographers, Les Daniels, discusses in *The Golden Age* how Marston’s conviction went far beyond mere support and into developing his own theories—specifically that of a coming matriarchy which would benefit all of society (22). As such, Marston made sure that Wonder Woman’s creation was imbued with purpose to help usher in that matriarchy; a good first step was to give instructional material to children in the form of comics (Daniels 12). Finding female representation in comics to be lacking depth, Marston noted: “Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power [...] The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman” (Marston, *Why Americans Read Comics* 42-43). Marston’s main objective is easily surmised—as comics were reaching the height of their popularity in the 1940s, for her existence to have meaning or purpose, Wonder Woman would need to appeal to the young girls and women whom she could inspire. These intentions are important—they provide the grounds for Wonder Woman as a character with a clear role,

that she exists to promote a matriarchy and to preach female empowerment. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Marston's writing of Wonder Woman's clay birth.

Before Marston discloses Wonder Woman's origin, he first reveals the origin of the Amazons, which sets up the careful background of their significance and why a character like Wonder Woman is needed in the first place. Marston describes a fictional history where earth was once ruled by the rival gods of Ares and Aphrodite, who warred with one another for complete control—Ares seeking to rule with violence, while Aphrodite sought to conquer that violence with love (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 100). This sets up a dynamic that will pervade Wonder Woman comics for decades: the theme of aggressive, masculine violence versus loving, feminine strength. In order that she may defeat Ares and his men, who kill their brothers and sell women as slaves, Aphrodite “shaped with her own hands a race of super women,” breathes them full of life, “and also the power of love!” (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 101). These are the Amazons, and it is essential to note that Aphrodite physically creates them by herself—a theme we will see again later upon Diana's own birth. Aphrodite specifically imbues her Amazons with the power of love against Ares' aptitude for war and violence, going so far as to bestow her own magic girdle upon Queen Hippolyta and promise her that so long as she wears it, the Amazons will be “unconquerable” (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 101). It is crucial to observe that Aphrodite gives her own girdle—that of a goddess—to Hippolyta, and with it, a goddess' power. Such is the beginnings of the feminine utopia in which Wonder Woman will be born, where a matron deity creates her own race and bestows her own feminine power upon her creation, for the purpose of defeating (male) violence with love.

Still, the utopia is not born without struggle or conflict. Ares convinces his champion, Hercules, to attack the Amazons. Hippolyta, with the girdle, bests him easily, but shows him mercy. Hercules then exploits this mercy to woo Hippolyta into trusting him, stealing her girdle and enslaving all the Amazons (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 6). Two things are interesting to note regarding how Marston articulates this story: first, that he has Hippolyta tell it to Diana in her own words, the first-person account adding a strong layer of gravitas; second, that he breaks away from the more traditional 6-panel layout and instead employs a 2-page, almost newspaper-like spread of text that visually signals to the reader how critical this tale is.⁶ The text itself is dire—“Loaded with fetters, beaten and tormented by their captors, the Amazons were in despair”—and the art equally so, as artist H.G. Peter pointedly illustrates this despair with a close-up panel of Hippolyta, tears streaming down her face as she prays to Aphrodite for salvation (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 103). Aphrodite intervenes and grants Hippolyta the power to break her chains and re-capture the girdle, but on the condition that the Amazons wear bracers to remind them of their captivity, and “the folly of submitting to men’s domination!” (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 103). The women, now free, retreat to Paradise Island—note once again that they do not enact revenge—and establish “a paradise for women only” (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 103).

In his 2014 book, *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine*, researcher Tim Hanley makes critical arguments regarding the historical context needed in order to understand Wonder Woman’s symbolism as a

⁶ This original telling occurs in *All Star Comics* #8, but is re-told and re-visualized in *Wonder Woman* #1, both of which can be found re-printed in *The Wonder Woman Chronicles Vol. 1* cited here.

character—specifically, how her feminist message was born, grew, and changed through every decade of her publication (245). Through methodical research, Hanley finds that with every period following Marston, writers of *Wonder Woman* have “convoluted the character, muddying her odd yet feminist origin” (x). He offers a comprehensive outline of Wonder Woman’s publication history, working through every era of her book and juxtaposing it against real world events and the politics of each era. Hanley paints a stark picture of how far subsequent *Wonder Woman* writers take her from her birth, but in doing so, establishes some of the important details of Marston’s vision, including the significance of his Amazons. Hanley comments on the endowment of Aphrodite’s girdle specifically, and explains that it functions as a *zoster*—“a belt that represented a warrior’s power and heroism” (20). For Hercules to possess the girdle meant “absolute proof that he had conquered his foe,” and I would argue there are strong sexual undertones in the manner of that conquering, not least of which lies in the connotations behind the removal of one’s belt (20). Hanley goes on to say that “all of the utopian aspects of the island were rooted in the queen possessing this symbol of power and would disappear if a man possessed this power. Usually only male heroes earned this symbol of power, and through violence, but Marston showed that this power in the hands of a woman equaled peace and utopia” (20). What we observe in the establishment of the Amazons and Paradise Island, then, is sharp messaging that male sovereignty harms while female sovereignty heartens.

To further this point, Hanley also addresses the Amazons’ gauntlets, saying that they “took an object of oppression”—their chains—and turned them into “an object of strength”—their bullet-deflecting bracers (14). Marston declared that the worst quality of

comic books which he sought to remedy was “their blood-curdling masculinity” (Marston, *Why Americans Read Comics* 42). His cure was to subvert gender stereotypes in order to empower his female readers and prepare both genders for the coming matriarchy—here, by turning violent masculinity into female empowerment. Marston wrote the Amazons’ origin to characterize men as oppressors, and portray the Amazons with the heroic ingenuity to manipulate the tools of their oppression into tools of empowerment and protection. Hanley says that Marston believed male aggression and female “passivity” were not innate gender qualities, but ones taught by society, and that “patriarchy encouraged men to be dominant and ruled by their egocentrism, forcing women into a subordinate role” (57). Thus we see in the comic that should any man bind Wonder Woman’s bracers together, she loses her power—a clear metaphor for the detrimental effects of male rule. In depicting his female characters pushing back against subordination, Marston eschews those patriarchal expectations and sets up a blueprint for female readers to claim their own power and liberate themselves. This idea is central and oft-repeated in *Wonder Woman*, the most crucial piece of which is found in Diana’s matriarchal birth.

The inherent femininity of Diana’s birth is critical to her identity and to Marston’s message of empowerment. Not only is Diana born without need of a father, but Marston further emphasizes the story’s feminine essence by introducing another goddess—Athena—to aid Aphrodite and Hippolyta in Diana’s birth. On Paradise Island, Hippolyta “learns the secret art of moulding a human form” from Athena (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 104). This is a meaningful tie-in: recall that Hippolyta and the Amazons were shaped by Aphrodite’s own hands with the power of love. So, too, does Hippolyta

literally shape Diana, who is then blessed by both Aphrodite and Athena with the gifts of love and wisdom respectively. Marston's daughter once explained the heart of her father's psychology was that "if love is properly directed by wisdom, the force energy will be used to create, rather than to destroy" (Daniels 9). Just as the intangible concepts of love and wisdom exist in conjunction to give Diana power, so too do Aphrodite and Athena themselves work together as patrons of Diana. This is another instance where Marston shows how women's autonomous support of one another—both the Amazons themselves and now the female goddesses—benefit all. The illustration of Diana's birth in terms of artistic angle and composition even harks back to the same panel of Aphrodite creating Hippolyta—similarly drawn, but differently colored. It is a deeply symbolic scene to have both the Amazons and then Diana born of women only and of women's love specifically—it is precisely where their power lies, and it is Aphrodite herself who names the princess Diana "after the moon goddess, mistress of the chase!"⁷ (Marston, *Wonder Woman Chronicles* 104). That Aphrodite does so in honor of another goddess again emphasizes the bonds of female power and community. Thus Diana effectively has two mothers—Hippolyta in forming her and Aphrodite in bringing her to life. Athena acts as a watchful, guiding godmother. The scene is female, female, female—so much that there is neither the image nor mention of a man, god or otherwise, anywhere on the page depicting Diana's birth. This is not an accident; it is as purposeful a decision by Marston as the character herself, and validates the idea that Diana's matriarchal origin is fundamental to who Wonder Woman is. To erase this component of Diana's identity is to strike against what both she and the Amazons represent.

⁷ "Diana" being the Roman version of the Greek "Artemis." Marston frequently interchanges Greek and Roman names, most notably referring to the God of War first as "Ares" and later "Mars."

In her 2014 work, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, Jill Lepore spotlights how grave and indispensable Wonder Woman's feminist message was to Marston. While much has been written about Marston and his then-radical notions on women, love, and female power, no other scholar—with perhaps the exception of Les Daniels—has plunged as deeply and as detailed into Marston's past and his feelings on his creation as Lepore.⁸ Her work consists of examining Marston through previously-unseen documents, letters, and family records, painting a thorough picture of Marston's life, and in doing so, discovers feminist influences on Marston that were formerly either unknown to scholars or underdeveloped. For instance, Lepore fleshes out Marston and Olive Byrne's remarkable family link to Margaret Sanger and the birth control movement in the United States, thereby shedding a new light not only on Marston himself, but on Wonder Woman's entire creation and what preceded it. This leads Lepore to declare that while feminism birthed Wonder Woman, Wonder Woman also re-made feminism and exists as a “missing link” between the quest for women's suffrage and the state of feminism a hundred years later (*xiii*).

Lepore's work provides a basis from which to understand the history and meaning behind Wonder Woman's creation. Of particular note are the many quotes she pulls from Marston regarding his intentions of who Wonder Woman was and what she stood for, saying she was meant as an allegory for “what happens to all women when they submit to a man's domination,” and that the character was conceived “to set up a standard among

⁸ It is worth mentioning that the validity of Lepore's book has come into question by members of the Marston family. William Moulton Marston's granddaughter, Christie Marston, is a particularly vocal opponent of what she claims are fictional aspects of the work. Her chief objections include some of Lepore's sources; gossip being presented as fact; timelines that do not add up; and other criticisms. See Christie Marston's Facebook page for a record.

children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement” (220). With that so, a case can further be made against the Zeus-as-father origin. It says one thing to be blessed by female goddesses with female power; it says another to be a descendent of the most powerful male ruler and patriarch, and to receive power from male lineage. This argument is further strengthened when considering Marston’s notes to his editor, Sheldon Mayer, along with his first script:

Men (Greeks) [...] were afraid of [the Amazons] (masculine inferiority complex) and kept them heavily chained lest the women put one over as they always had before. The Goddess of Love comes along and helps women break their chains by giving them the greater force of real altruism. Whereupon men turn about face and actually helped the women get away from domestic slavery—as men are doing now. The NEW WOMEN thus freed and strengthened by supporting themselves (on Paradise Island) developed enormous physical and mental power. But they have to use it for other people’s benefit or they go back to chains, and weakness. (Lepore 188-189)

This explanation is significant; Marston is clear-cut in his purpose for Wonder Woman and the Amazons being an instructional tale for both genders—men needing not to fear women but assist them out of their “domestic slavery,” and women having the innate strength to rule and support themselves. That women’s power is made from love, and that that power should be used to help others is at its root the basis of the superhero genre, and of heroic myth in general. Lepore explains that Marston truly believed in his story not only as an allegory, but as history, because his writing was meant to record “a great movement now under way—the growth in the power of women” (189). Lepore describes how, in Marston’s letter, he tells Mayer to send along any changes regarding the character, costume, names, and the like, but that “about the story’s feminism, he was unmovable. ‘Let that theme alone,’ he told [Mayer], ‘or drop the project’” (189).

By outlining Marston's feminist and psychological ideas alongside his family history, Lepore also comes to document what she refers to as the wending river of feminism, and in each turn of that river, Wonder Woman has her place—be it suffrage, birth control, or women's liberation (296). Her exploration of feminism coupled with Marston's philosophies on women's capacity for love and women's power can be used as a lens through which to look at Wonder Woman's latest, more violent and patriarchal story changes and, from that, assess where Wonder Woman stands now. Lepore ultimately suggests that feminism is now in a troubled state—if so, and if Wonder Woman has a clear and prominent place in feminism, it is important to note how her *New 52* changes affect that place, and consider whether there is a correlation between this troubled state and Wonder Woman's loss of matriarchal power.

As we have established that Marston made a conscious and deliberate choice to create Diana in a calculated way, I believe that Wonder Woman's fatherless origin is as important to her story and characterization—if not more important—as any other feminine or feminist theme within her book. If the concept were as simple as the need to give Diana power, Marston could have made her born of any deity, female or otherwise. Instead, Diana is made from blessed clay, shaped by the hands of an Amazonian matriarch in Hippolyta, who was herself also formed by the Goddess of Love. This is a feminine lineage, surrounded by a female community, made to inspire female readers and prepare male readers for female autonomy and rule. To erase this quality from Diana by retconning her birth with the installation of a male god-king is to, I believe, strip Wonder Woman of the heart of who she is as a character and leave the audience instead with a generic, Xena-like female warrior archetype. Likewise, consider Jerry Siegel and Joe

Shuster's creation of Superman. One may argue that at the heart of Superman are Ma and Pa Kent, raising him to use his powers for the benefit of mankind. To erase that parentage from his backstory is to be left with a character who is Superman in name only. So does a Diana whose parentage is altered become Wonder Woman in name only, her matriarchal origin being just that vital to her identity.

Unfortunately, the predominantly male writers following Marston offer mixed and mostly conflicting interpretations of his heroine. Cartoonist and comics historian Trina Robbins, writing in her introduction to *Wonder Woman and Psychology*, says that, since Marston's death, Wonder Woman "has been a slave to whoever writes and draws her. Many of those have not really liked her, have perhaps felt threatened by the strongest woman in comics. Thus they have diminished her through the years" (xvi). Not only was Marston's heroine new and his run ground-breaking, but more importantly, it was fully embraced, surpassing even *Superman* in sales records.⁹ In written correspondence to her son, Annie Dalton Marston comments on *Wonder Woman's* incredible success: "How amazing that Wonder Woman should make such a record. You are certainly to be congratulated upon your success in the invention of such a popular heroine—to surpass Superman is an achievement—although my knowledge of comics is decidedly limited, I do know that Superman has taken the highest place in that variety of literature(?)" (Letter [6 May]). Yet, following Marston's death, *Wonder Woman* did not see comparable levels of popularity or sales success until the post-*Crisis* era of the 80s, when George Pérez re-made the character while maintaining Marston's vision. Had Marston ruminated so

⁹ See Daniels, Hanley, and/or Lepore for full charts and statistics.

deeply on issues of gender or not, he created an origin that matters—one that Pérez clearly saw as an essential feature, and upon which he built to new success.

Chapter III.

George Pérez and Patriarch's World Post-Crisis

In their research and quest for knowledge on Wonder Woman and her significance, historians and academics have uncovered the rich backstory of Wonder Woman's inventor and the legend behind her creation. Yet, as *Wonder Woman* approaches almost a hundred years of publication, she becomes a character with a deep and layered mythology inside her comics just as well as out of it. While the intentions of her creator are important to understanding her, so too is her in-story mythology critical to understanding what she means and why she exists. In his reboot of the title, George Pérez meticulously develops Wonder Woman's story in such a way as to build upon the mythology devised by Marston to further cultivate the mission of her character in-story, which in turn drives her outward meaning and greater cultural significance.¹⁰

How is this mythology impactful? During his seminal conversation with Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell extrapolates on his well-known theories of myths and stories as being both reflective of and instructional toward life. Campbell goes into detail on how life is essentially a history of stories which offer "perspective on what's happening [...] these bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage" (2). In this way, whether written down or spoken word, humanity

¹⁰ While Pérez was also joined by Greg Potter and then Len Wein in plotting and scripting duties for a time, post-*Crisis Wonder Woman* is popularly recognized as Pérez's vision, and for the sake of brevity will be referred to here as such.

utilizes stories to find truth and to understand ourselves (4). As such, once a person connects with a story, “there is such a feeling, from one or another of these traditions, of information of a deep, rich, life-vivifying sort” (2). In other words, stories and myths in particular are life-affirming and inspiring. Moyers builds upon this idea, that humans connect to and develop myths in order to understand the world, and “to harmonize our lives with reality” (2). In finding truth and understanding, at the same time, we also *learn*. Campbell explains the instructional qualities of myth, where blueprints already exists for anything we wish to know. “We have not even to risk the adventure [of life] alone,” he says, “for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path” (151). It is this instructional heroic path in which Marston believed—that he could use the mythology of Wonder Woman to teach and challenge his readers, and change society itself. Decades later, George Pérez re-creates Wonder Woman to further spread Marston’s message, doing so in part by expanding the mythological aspects of her world and portraying her as a hero worth emulating. Much of the success of Pérez’s run is further born of the underlying social commentary embedded within his narrative, and ultimately suggests that much of Wonder Woman’s capacity for instruction is inherent within her birth myth.

Still, the most significant markers of Pérez’s tenure on *Wonder Woman* is not only Diana’s origin story, but the re-telling of the birth of the Amazons, which, like Marston, sets the groundwork for the power dynamics and overall theme of gender equality in the comic. Pérez first opens the book with a flashback to 30,000 BC where he showcases early man’s struggle and fear for his own survival. Early man chastises himself for feeling fear, that it is an emotion reserved for women, and hides away—but when early

woman seeks to comfort him, he lashes out and kills her (10). The colors on the page reflect the dark, lonely, ominous and violent tone of the text. That Pérez chooses to open his run with the immediate, somber image of man's capacity for violence—specifically, their brutality against women—and dating it as far back as he does is indicative of the intentions of his run and what the book will ultimately address as a whole. Note further that early woman is first seen giving care and empathy to early man, whose reaction is emasculation and violence. The subtextual tone of the narration, speaking on behalf of early man, is tinted with the same element of victim-blaming often used by perpetrators of domestic violence: “you pull away—but she insists! You try to ignore her—but her whimpering taunts you ... teases you ... makes you ... snap!” (10). There is no expression of remorse by early man for committing this murder—only more anger when he sees the bright essence of the woman's soul depart from her body. Two short pages later, Pérez has Ares speak for all mankind: “Force is all men understand! Force is all they worship!” as he wishes to use this to “crush them into eternal submission”—that is, to *force* man to worship the gods, rather than inspire their devotion in the compassionate manner of Artemis (12). Pérez uses Ares to spell out what was seen in those first few pages—that because man seeks/is violence and power, it is all they understand—and this proclamation sets up a significant frame for the audience before they meet the Amazons. There are layers of meaning to this short opening scene—from the psychology of male-on-female violence to the commentary on the toxicity of learned masculinity—the depths of which Pérez slowly ekes out over the full course of his run so that much is still revealed to the reader dozens of issues later. But the immediate and most important point of including this opening is in its relation to the birth of the Amazons.

From this bleak and foreboding place, Pérez then takes the reader to sunny, bright Olympus, where a group of goddesses petition Zeus for his blessing in a new race they seek to create who will encourage mankind to worship, and thus increase, the gods' power: the Amazons. Ares is naturally opposed to the idea of nurturing with love, and believes his control over man to be inevitable. Zeus scoffs at the idea of female warriors, but Artemis reasons with him: "Does their gender truly matter, Lord Zeus? They shall be as no other women ever before seen by man! Strong ... brave ... compassionate! They shall be Olympus' glory—" (13). These are interesting words by Artemis. On the one hand, she appeals to the fact that one's gender should not affect one's value or ability; on the other hand, she uses traditionally "male" qualities to describe why this new race would prove valuable to the gods—because they will be "strong" and "brave." Yet, it is key that she includes "compassionate," as that concept is entirely antithetical to Ares' purpose and existence, and is deemed a traditionally feminine quality (as seen in the compassionate, empathetic early woman pages earlier). The compassion of this new race of women, then, is what will set them apart from other mortals and not only make them special, but is the source from where their power will ultimately stem—especially in terms of resisting Ares and stifling his rule.¹¹ Zeus neither blesses nor disparages the plan, caring little, as he does not believe the gods to be in danger of losing worshippers. He is portrayed as impatient and cavalier—hardly a father figure so much as a pompous king; Hera, the obedient wife. Note here that the number of goddesses involved has grown from Marston's run—where there was originally only Aphrodite and Athena, now

¹¹ Athena calls this out in the next panel, telling Ares he is afraid the new race of women will "be able to resist even your base influence" (13). Ares thinks it matters little, as it is men who build empires and do so through murder and destruction, thus his power will never be threatened (14).

Pérez also includes Artemis, Demeter, and Hestia. There is more power in this greater number, as the goddesses collectively decide to forge ahead, with or without Zeus' blessing. It is from this willful and independent act of the goddesses that the Amazons spring, and they will come to reflect that same autonomy in their creation and their very existence.

Pérez takes Marston's concept of a fatherless birth for Diana and adds a depth of meaning by applying it to the Amazons as well, but in a manner that is beyond the act of creation by a lone goddess—rather, these Amazons are born of many mothers, not the least of which is Mother Gaea herself. Charon ferries the goddesses to the Cavern of Souls, where they find “the womb of Gaea—mother of us all,” within whose lights “are the souls of women—their lives cut short by man's fear and ignorance” (16). It is clear why the dark opening scene is necessary; Pérez depicts the souls of those killed by man as lights floating within Gaea's womb.¹² Pérez, then, employs Marston's origin story which already lacks any male involvement and multiplies it threefold: not only will Wonder Woman's own birth be decidedly matriarchal, and so too the birth of the Amazons, but further still, all are born of Mother Gaea, with a group of female goddesses acting as midwives. This is a masterstroke from Pérez that, much like Marston, feels ahead of its time. Pérez is another male author/artist who understands and deliberately underscores the importance of Wonder Woman's female creation, and what is not read specifically in words can be inferred through his art, particularly where the Amazons' souls pour forth from the sky, having developed from “Gaea's womb” (17). Here is seen

¹² With the light of their lives extinguished, they leave the world physically dim in their absence. The opening scene is thus dark in more ways than one.

a large spiral form, like mother earth's belly, from which the Amazons' souls drop out into a pool of water.¹³ The emphasis on the Amazons emerging from earth's womb is front and center, and there is nothing phallic or masculine about the imagery; it is instead undeniably sapphic, with the goddesses describing themselves as "midwives to Gaea's new offspring" (17). When the newborn Amazons step out from the water, the colors on the page are bright and hopeful. Most importantly, the women's nude bodies are not drawn objectively or with a male gaze, but rather with a kind of respect and reverence. The goddesses grant the Amazons the gifts of wisdom and love, saying they will "find strength in these gifts. They are your most sacred birthright—they are your power!" (18). Thus the Amazons' strengths come from the female gods and is rooted in their femininity, because they shall use it to "form a sacred sisterhood" that will allow none to resist their power (18). At the end, there is one soul left in Gaea's womb who is not born along with the Amazons. Athena says "that one has a special destiny" (17). The audience knows this will be Wonder Woman by the conclusion of the issue, and Pérez is equally careful and thorough when writing her birth as well.

In her 2017 essay, "It's a Man's World: Wonder Woman and Attitudes Toward Gender Roles," Erin Currie writes about how sexism, domestic violence, sexual violence, and other issues related to gender are still present in the world, and contends that Wonder Woman—just as Marston wanted her to—"exists to guide us toward equality for all genders" (214). To illustrate her point of how Wonder Woman embodies an instructional guide for gender equality, she identifies and defines specific terms and ideas, such as *benevolent sexism*, *ambivalent sexism*, and, most important here, *hostile sexism*. Hostile

¹³ Not unlike a birthing pool; see how Pérez adds layer upon layer to the metaphor.

sexism, she explains, is “the expectation that women will conform to prescribed gender roles and the withdrawal of protection and the justification of punishment/discrimination for those who don’t conform. The main expectation is that women will submit to the domination of men” (216). That idea, we know, is exactly what Marston created Wonder Woman to combat. Currie goes on to describe other consequences of hostile sexism, such as subjection to sexual advances and inferior positions in the workplace, which women are conditioned to accept for fear of punishment, as “the main feelings associated with hostile sexism are negative and include anger and contempt” (216). She discusses the example of Ares in Marston’s run, who manipulates the anger of men to fuel their fight against the Amazons and Wonder Woman for their simple act of daring to challenge male rule (216). Currie analyzes Pérez’s work through the same lens, and focuses on his depiction of Amazonian birth, explaining that “domestic violence is a tool of dominance that some men use to maintain ongoing control in relationships and as punishment when their partners displease them. Thus, it is beautifully ironic that the Amazons are created by the Greek goddesses from the souls of women previously killed by men” (216-217). Currie does not delve further here, but makes a valid and powerful point. Still, to call this narrative choice “ironic” is almost too whimsical a term for a scene that reads as dignified and moving. Pérez is clearly measured and premeditating in his plot decisions, which are especially impactful in addressing gender dynamics through their effects on both male and female genders.

Further to this point, Currie also explains how gender roles and the patriarchal structure in which they exist are not just harmful to women, but to men as well. For example, she explains that “Men are expected to be dominant, successful, and physically

large. Men who do not meet these expectations experience negative consequences” (220). She points to Dr. Psycho as evidence of a man who suffers at the hands of patriarchy. While this is a solid example, I would put the spotlight on Pérez’s opening pages once again, where he immediately addresses this very idea in early man’s cowering after being cast out from his tribe: “Only yesterday you were called a man! You hunted with men and fought with men. That was before you met the sabertooth ... the one who bested you ... the one who took your hand! Now, you are a man no more. For men are hunters—and hunters need hands!” (9). Pérez links the cave dweller’s value to his physical ability to hunt, which is then tied to his acceptance in the male tribe. Not being able to hunt means he is no longer a man, and as such, is cast out—to his impending death. Losing one’s identity as a man and his belonging to the tribe thus equates to death. Through this metaphor, Pérez shows how patriarchal structures and rigid gender roles are harmful to all, and this has not changed since as far back as the prehistoric era. Pérez draws attention to the complex issues wrought by patriarchal society in this scene and again in the next, when the Amazons meet Heracles—all vital building blocks before the audience may finally meet Wonder Woman.

To further drive home how harmful unchecked male power can be, Pérez makes it a point to re-tell Marston’s story of the enslavement of the Amazons. His opening narration is compelling:

The winds of time carry the years away. But upon the gale ride the voices of poets! Listen! From their mouths pour wondrous tales—tales of a city-state governed solely by women—of a place where compassion and justice reign—a place the poets call Themyscira! In this way, the power and the glory of the Amazons is soon known throughout all Greece! Yet, kings do not like popularity—nor do they like power—unless it is their own! Thus the rulers of Greece grow jealous of the Amazons. And so the poets are seized—and bribed—and threatened. Now are tales told of Amazon

atrocities—of murders, wars, and thievery! Now do the goddesses cry from Olympus' heights! For their daughters have become outcasts—regarded by all mankind as different ... strange ... and even inhuman! Now, mankind understands the Amazons not at all. And that which man does not understand, he fears! (19)

There is much going on in this transition. Pérez plays on the real-world power dynamics that re-write history, often to the exclusion of powerful and/or important women.¹⁴ It is also another commentary on man's ego and all-encompassing desire for power—a theme Pérez returns to many times in his run, with increasing emphasis. That the powerful Amazons are both misunderstood and feared by men is telling, particularly in that they are seen as “inhuman.” It suggests that women with power and autonomy are not only grotesque, but a threat to be quelled. Currie's notes on hostile sexism can be applied again here, as the Amazons do not conform to general passive gender roles and thus men seek to punish them. Ultimately, power-hungry men ruin all they touch, particularly at the expense of virtuous women. Such is Pérez's transition and introduction to Heracles.

Where Marston's run shows Heracles seeking to conquer Hippolyta, steal her girdle, and enslave the Amazons, Pérez treats him no more delicately—rather, he further emphasizes Heracles' savagery to sow emotion in his audience and illustrate the danger of man's aggression. Heracles is symbolic of the worst of man, and echoes back again to those first pages with the cave dweller. In Heracles, we see that man has not evolved much beyond his early gravitation toward violence and misogyny. The first words he speaks are dripping with misogyny, in fact—pushing away the woman he has just used for his pleasure, blaming Hera for his madness, and asserting himself and his ego as

¹⁴ For more on this trend, see the National Women's History Alliance: <http://www.nwhp.org/about-2/why-womens-history/>

being obedient to no one (19).¹⁵ These qualities are what makes the mythic hero easily manipulated by Ares, who speaks through/controls the woman in the scene—a mere few words from her to implant the idea of his subservience and Heracles is instantly driven to violence, saying “No longer do I desire to please women ... only to conquer them!” (20). He is an aggressive narcissist and chauvinist and mocks Hippolyta, saying “You expect men to follow women? Heracles is your better, harlot queen!” (23). Note the third person and the resort to sexual insults, which Heracles uses frequently. These are the psychological attributes of what we would call “rape culture” today.¹⁶ Pérez uses this characterization of Heracles as an opening to the sexual assault and brutalization of the Amazons, and this piece of Wonder Woman’s backstory is important to understand before Diana’s own creation can be addressed.

Given this, Pérez does not gloss over the abuse of the Amazons at the hands of men, and where rape can sometimes be seen as a lazy plot device, it is an important element in the gender/power dynamics of the comic to illustrate both the strength and the burden born of the Amazons’ power of compassion. Where Marston employed Hippolyta to tell her own story, Pérez instead allows the event to unfold in real time, fleshing out the scene to add detail and shocking the audience to both witness and experience Hippolyta’s grief themselves. It is especially poignant that Hippolyta is first seen granting mercy to Heracles, saying that men and women should “face one another—not with swords, but with love, laughter, and equality” (25). Her compassion is used

¹⁵ He is even physically controlling, grabbing the woman and throwing her to the floor in yet another callback to domestic violence.

¹⁶ Although writing in the 1980s, Pérez incorporates many components of rape culture into his run on *Wonder Woman*. The domestic violence and victim-blaming of the cave dweller, Heracles’ toxic masculinity, the slut-shaming of Hippolyta, as well as her actual rape at the hands of Heracles are all elements that hark back to a culture our society is still battling to change today: <https://www.thenation.com/article/ten-things-end-rape-culture/>

against her when Heracles poisons her and steals her girdle—it speaks to Hippolyta’s and the Amazons’ strength that they cannot be defeated without trickery, and speaks to Heracles’ own cowardice that he cannot accept an honorable defeat at the hands of a woman.¹⁷ Pérez quickly shifts the scene from peaceful on one page to treacherous the next, and Hippolyta suddenly wakes to find herself in chains: “She hears the woeful cries of her Amazon sisters! They wail as Heracles’ men take up arms against them! Wail as their homes are torched, their bodies ravaged, their pride stripped away!” (26). Heracles gloats over the queen: “Did you truly believe I would be your ally? No woman is Heracles’ equal! And no woman withholds herself from Heracles embrace—even if she must be readied by drug and chain! Now, I have made you a real woman!” (26). Heracles’ reprehensible actions mean little to him—the Amazons are nothing but an entertaining avenue through which to assert his masculinity—and it is an especially depraved notion that Hippolyta is only a “real woman” upon her rape. Pérez includes this scene, focuses attention on it, has Heracles speak his vile words for a purpose—he illustrates in detail what Marston believed when he wrote about “blood-curdling masculinity” being harmful to both genders. Pérez’s characterizations drive this message home with Heracles as the vessel that exemplifies the dangerous nature of male aggression.

In conveying this emotional scene, the book is especially strong in its art. Pérez’s pencils and layouts are without equal here—critical in that there is no sexualization or objectification of Hippolyta. Her assault is not shown through a male gaze—it is not titillating or fetishized. Rather, Pérez focuses his panels to draw attention to the pain in

¹⁷ That Heracles excuses his actions by blaming the “madness” Hera bestowed on him further draws on a sort of systemic misogyny, that ultimately woman is to blame for man’s actions.

Hippolyta's eyes. The camera angles and viewpoints are low, bringing the audience down to the ground with her, and as such, makes the humiliation and violence endured by Hippolyta palpable. Even Heracles is not drawn from a perspective of power—rather, he looks mad, menacing, terrifying. He is neither idealized nor idolized through the artwork, which makes it clear that the audience ought to detest, not admire, his power. This part of the story is crucial, and Pérez's art gives it further emotional weight.

To sharpen his point moreover, Pérez contrasts the evil of Heracles with the empathy of Hippolyta, as it is only because of the strength and understanding begotten of her devotion to her goddesses that she is able to rise up against her captor. Athena reminds Hippolyta of the source of her power and emphasizes that “bloody vengeance is not the answer”—that is clearly the way of man, and the Amazons can only re-assert themselves by turning back to “that which Gaea gave [them]” (27). She means the gifts the Amazons were given upon their creation: wisdom, love, truth, and the power found in those virtues. Only in her acceptance of this is Hippolyta able to break her chains. When a renegade group of Amazons led by Hippolyta's sister, Antiope, seek to meet violence with violence, Hippolyta urges: “Amazons, remember the source of our power—remember Gaea's way!” (28). But Antiope is without mercy, seeking to hunt Heracles down and “slit his accursed throat from ear to ear!” (29). Hippolyta denounces such vengeance, as does Menalippe, who says that is the way of Ares—the Amazons will not find glory by resorting to war (29). Unable to compromise, Antiope and a small group of like-minded followers split off to form their own tribe.¹⁸ Vengeance, violence, and bloodthirst look equally bad on the Amazons as they do on man, and it is the desire

¹⁸ Pérez later re-introduces this group, known as the Bana-Mighdall—Egyptian Amazons. Antiope's life becomes one tainted by tragedy, and the story of the Bana as a tribe is permeated with violence.

for violence that splits the women apart. Pérez repeatedly shows his audience that anger and aggression breed nothing but suffering and division. And while Pérez gives Hippolyta and her Amazons every reason to hate men, they are unwavering in their ability to find forgiveness and compassion, even despite all that befalls them. Not only is this compassion their strength—it is a way for Pérez to show that female autonomy and feminism do not equate to a hatred of men. The Amazons’ power is the wisdom and love in their hearts; in the strength and understanding to turn the other cheek they are able to re-assert themselves to freedom as their goddesses’ paragons of peace and virtue. Pérez appears to echo Marston in conveying the compassion of women, and those who deny it in favor of violence ultimately meet tragic ends. It is simultaneously the Amazons’ gift and their burden, and Hippolyta’s capacity for mercy stands in sharp contrast against Heracles’ selfishness and evil. The two characters, then, ultimately symbolize the more stereotypical tendencies of their genders. This is only the beginning of Pérez’s run, and it is with the introduction of Wonder Woman that the comic further discusses, analyzes, and questions the depths of gender representation and gender equality.

With the birth of Diana, Pérez builds upon Marston’s matriarchal creation, but includes small twists and changes that add meaning to the story, not detract from it. Thirty centuries into their lives in paradise, Hippolyta cannot shake a deep sense of yearning within her soul. The oracle Menalippe explains that what she feels is “the great call of destiny” (32). She tells Hippolyta of their earlier lives and reincarnation by the goddesses, but reveals that “only you, my queen, were pregnant at the time of your death! Now, you hear the call of your unborn daughter!” (32). If scholars and fans see it as an inspired choice to fashion the Amazons from the reincarnated souls of murdered women,

Pérez adds still another sobering layer to this by making Hippolyta pregnant at the time. Menalippe instructs Hippolyta to “Follow Artemis’ bidding!”—to go to the shore and sculpt a figure from the sands of the beach (32). Through steady hands, love in her heart, and prayer to her goddesses, the audience witnesses Hippolyta forming her daughter. She is further directed: “open yourself to fair Artemis—that the mid-wife of all Olympus may enter you! And with her guidance, let your spirit cry out ... unto the womb of Gaea!” (32-33). Pérez abandons subtext here—this is a blatantly sexual scene, culminating in conception and finally, birth. There is nothing subtle or delicate; it is not merely a goddess blessing sand. Hippolyta certainly conceives Diana through the clay, but also through Artemis, to whom she must “open” herself, to receive her as she would a man; Hippolyta cries out in passion upon Diana’s conception, then again upon Diana’s birth. Diana is thus born sans-patriarch; a purely female birth, with Artemis fulfilling what would be the role of father. And although Diana is formed via clay, from Gaea’s womb, through Artemis, it is Hippolyta who undergoes the birthing act, experiencing what one would during labor—Pérez certainly draws her as such—sweat pouring down her face, a smile on her lips as she lifts her newborn into her arms. Pérez takes Marston’s clay origin and enhances it by drawing Hippolyta and her goddess into sharp focus, so that Diana’s birth and even her conception are done without the involvement of men.

In further and more subtle ways, Pérez speaks through his characters throughout his first issue, and his messaging can be lost without a closer reading. For instance, when Diana completes the tournament on Themyscira and is presented as the winner, Hippolyta instructs the Amazons to “witness a birth of another kind!”—that is, the emergence of

their champion (39).¹⁹ This wording, crucially, has a double-meaning. It is certainly a reference to the introduction of their champion, but that Pérez specifically has her say “a birth of another kind” is a coy reference to Diana, who is by all accounts “birthed” in a different “kind.” Hippolyta is not required to speak these words—Pérez could have simply had her say “Amazons, meet your champion,” and reveal Diana immediately. I believe this decision is deliberate, because Diana’s birth and her beginning as an Amazon is, at the root of it, her entire identity. To support this, Pérez uses his entire over-sized first issue to set up the Amazons, depict both the Amazons’ and Diana’s creation, and finally, Diana’s emergence as Themyscira’s champion. He does not hurriedly skip through these formative pages, or leave them out to revisit at another time. Rather, he wisely lays the foundation he knows is imperative to understanding Wonder Woman as a character—that her identity is intertwined in her femininity. This is further underscored by the fact that, unlike Marston’s run, Steve Trevor’s first appearance is pushed out of this issue—he does not take the spotlight away from Diana or the Amazons, nor, for that matter, does any male character. The later addition of the Diana Rockwell Trevor backstory in issue #12 is particularly poignant and impactful, as it further builds upon Wonder Woman’s origin, inserting yet another layer of female influence to her “birth” as a warrior that no other writer has added to or explored in other reboots.²⁰ All of these are carefully calculated narrative decisions for which the book is better off, particularly when judged against its counterpart in *The New 52*.

¹⁹ It is Themyscira’s champion who will be their representative in what Marston called “Man’s World,” but Pérez’s adapts to “Patriarch’s World.” Pérez specifically calls out the patriarchy by name; to bequeath Diana her own patriarch in Zeus further flies in the face of Pérez’s thoughtful groundwork.

²⁰ Rockwell Trevor even refers to Diana as “daughter” when bidding her farewell. This is to say nothing of the influence of motherhood and its implications on Steve Trevor, an analysis of which would be enough for a thesis of its own.

Nevertheless, long before *The New 52* is conceived, Pérez himself plays with the idea of Zeus as a powerful patriarch in Diana's life. When Diana saves her gods from Ares, Zeus finally takes note of the Amazons, finding them impressive—especially Diana. He speaks to Hippolyta and says that he looks forward to the Amazons “serving me further—and sharing in the true love of Zeus!” (164). It leaves both the Amazons and the goddesses with a foreboding feeling, prompting Artemis to declare her fear that “his sudden interest in the Amazons will ultimately undermine the very reason for their existence” (165). This is a notable line—Artemis is clearly saying that Zeus using the Amazons for his pleasure negates the reason they were created. Their capacity for love is meant to heal the gender divide, not exist to fulfill the desires of men—not as sexual playthings, and especially not for those in power. In its greater narrative context, I would argue that this line captures exactly what happens to Wonder Woman when she is characterized by the Zeus origin; her very existence is undermined. From this, Pérez explores the influence of Zeus on the Amazons; however, rather than relegate him solely to a father figure, Pérez plays up the more lascivious aspects of the King of the Gods and pushes his characterization into sexual and purposely uncomfortable territory to serve as a commentary on gender relations.

This commentary becomes clearer as the scene progresses, and Pérez writes it so that neither the goddesses nor the Amazons allow Zeus's lechery to go unchallenged. Artemis swears that “Paradise Island will be no one's brothel,” putting Zeus' intentions front and center (228). However, Zeus continues to leer over Diana, commenting that she is a “most special breed,” who “deserves my special favor” (228). Pan goads him on: “Indeed, milord—as your own son Heracles once favored her proud mother! ‘Tis only

fitting that the daughter should be the first of the Amazons to experience thy manly grace—before you turn your attention to the others!” (228). Pan gets a sick enjoyment out of the thought that Zeus should use the Amazons sexually; that he compares Heracles’ rape of Hippolyta to Zeus “favoring” Diana with such an amused tone registers disgust in the reader. Pérez is clever in what he does here, both in the implications of what is happening and in how he depicts it. That the male gods and patriarch king immediately stoop to this behavior and this view of the Amazons is very much a commentary on male-female gender relations; we can apply Currie’s gender work again here, that under patriarchal institutions, men generally consider women only in how desirable and useful they are to their own pleasure. The ensuing rejection of Zeus’ prurience conveys the lesson that Diana, Hippolyta, and the Amazons—thus, women in general—have value above and beyond their sexual bodies; a value not as strongly expressed in later runs, and particularly not within *The New 52*.

Zeus’ characterization might actually be humorous, were it not repulsive and immediately recognizable by virtually any woman reading the book. When he finally appears to Diana, his first words are a command: “Heed thy master’s voice,” that she has earned a “special gift” (231). He asserts his power over her in speech before he does so in flesh, and leaves no room to question that she ought to be subservient to him, her master. Zeus views his sexual attention as a privilege he is bestowing and Diana’s body as a place over which he has dominion. This hits Hippolyta particularly hard, who feels “something painfully familiar in his tone” (231). The thought of the King of the Gods forcing himself on her daughter is understandably traumatizing, triggering for Hippolyta. When Zeus appears in the sky in front of all the Amazons, half naked in a loincloth, and

commands Diana to worship him, she is doe-eyed and bemused (232). She explains to Zeus that she already worships him, but he clarifies to the horror of all that it is a “communion of the flesh” he seeks (233). Diana responds that such a decision must be mutual—he should obtain her consent, which she does not give. That Diana should not only refuse Zeus, but claim autonomy over herself while doing so infuriates him, and he strikes Diana with a lightning bolt while threatening “before I am through, child, thou wilt beg to give thyself to me!” (233-234). Not only does Zeus once again mirror the anger and violence of prehistoric man, but he does so with the same taste for sexual violence as Heracles. Hippolyta, witness to this, does not sit idly by, and Zeus threatens her, too—not only will he assault the daughter, but the matriarch as well. Still, Hippolyta does not back down: “Your cruel son Heracles showed me such ‘respect’ centuries ago, Zeus! [...] I shall not allow his father to trifle thus with my only daughter!” (234). That she calls him “Zeus” rather than “Lord” signals respect lost, and despite her inferior status, we see the matriarch defy the rageful, deviant god-king regardless. Zeus stoops to the misogynist’s natural defense and tells Hippolyta that she is forgetting her place. On the contrary—Hippolyta knows her place well. She is a mother to Diana first and foremost, and that trumps any potential servitude to a god who would abuse them. It is not until Hera finally intervenes that the conflict is diffused, and Diana is made to undergo a series of tests to determine her “worth” to the gods. From all of this, Pérez shows how detrimental male inclusion can be to Wonder Woman’s world—that even the most legendary of patriarchs is not immune to the more base inclinations of his gender. Moreover, regardless of Zeus’ status, Diana and Hippolyta maintain their agency and independence, standing up to the most powerful of rulers to assert their autonomy. With

this, Pérez is only getting started. In undertaking the trials set before her by the gods, Diana's truth—her purpose—is fully realized.

Having set through Doom's Doorway to complete the challenge of the gods, Pérez's first arc finally culminates in Hippolyta and Diana freeing a remorseful Heracles from an eternity of punishment and suffering. As Zeus watches over Diana's progress, he says that she will only be able to survive the ordeal and return home "if this clay statue given life is indeed one with the earth-goddess—only if she is truly the living embodiment of all that is woman!" (309-310). Of course, Diana overcomes all that is thrown at her, to the surprise of all—particularly Zeus, who is "duly humbled" at Diana's strength, her loyalty to her deities, and the mercy she shows to his son (324). The source of her success is clear: Pérez speaks through Zeus to say that Diana is the personification of the virtue of womanhood, and it is from this virtue that she is powerful. Heracles, now free, begs the Amazons' forgiveness: "I have given ye much cause to revile me! I betrayed your trust and made mockery of your kindness! In a world of ignorance and belligerence, I stood tall—as I believed was my right as a man! I could not admit that the Amazons were not preaching domination over man, but rather equal merit—!" (326). The Amazons, with tears in their eyes, immediately both forgive and welcome him—they forgive what Heracles himself deems "unforgivable" (326). Not only is Heracles saved, but also *converted*—he now understands the error of his ways, and believes in the Amazons' message of equality. Pérez introduces both Heracles and Zeus as villains, their male chauvinism running counter to the Amazon's purpose of using the power innate in their femininity to promote equality. It is specifically the flaws in their maleness which renders them harmful to the Amazons—their egos, their sexual violence, their desire for

domination that leads to female subjugation. But Pérez runs the arcs of these characters full circle to redeem them in the end, and this is significant—it promotes peace and equality amongst both genders, which is the ultimate purpose of Wonder Woman both as a character and as a cultural symbol.

That the edifying foundation built by Pérez is undone between both Azzarello and later Morrison is, I believe, wasteful. That Azzarello subverts Pérez's work in *The New 52* is especially egregious, given the focused and deliberate portrayal of the Amazons' outrage over Zeus' intrusion into Diana's life, and the serious groundwork Pérez lays to demonstrate that Zeus is naturally inclined to sabotage Diana's function as a creation of the goddesses. Diana's ability to serve as an instructional hero—to humble the greatest of patriarchs and cure him of his toxic sexual aggression; to reform the most reviled enemy of the Amazons in Heracles—is undone if Diana is not birthed solely from female characters. Further, to portray Zeus as the source of her power discourages the idea that Wonder Woman's femininity is her strength. After their encounter with the gods, Hippolyta tells Diana: "You were mine before the gods breathed life into that clay" (236). This declaration speaks to a mother-daughter bond that goes beyond life itself. By retconning Diana's origin to include Zeus as her father, such powerful sentiment is erased.

Eventually, Diana's origin and her function as champion of the Amazons provide an opportunity to return to Joseph Campbell and his thoughts on the function of mythology. Campbell compares mythology to a computer, saying:

You buy a certain software, and there is a whole set of signals that lead to the achievement of your aim. If you begin fooling around with signals that belong to another system of software, they just won't work. Similarly, in mythology—if you have a mythology in which the metaphor

for the mystery is the father, you are going to have a different set of signals from what you would have if the metaphor for the wisdom and mystery of the world were the mother. (25)

Campbell encompasses the central “problem” of Diana’s revised origin best here, and how coincidental that he speaks directly to the idea of a mother/father switch, as this is exactly what happens when one alters Diana’s birth myth from a sole matriarch to one which includes a patriarch—the so-called “signals” are crossed; it does not function as originally intended, and the inherent purpose is lost. What Pérez does in his rebooted title, then, is twofold: he preserves the original matriarchal origin while making it even more female-centric; and he builds a mythology for Diana that grants her character depth and further reach into society, promoting a message of social equality. If, as Campbell says, myths serve to uncover truth; to provide life-affirming knowledge; and to instruct us via the path of the hero, Pérez accomplishes this by using his run to grow female power through the matriarchal births of the Amazons and of Wonder Woman herself. He makes the power and autonomy of the goddesses a focal point; showcases the inherent strength found in femininity; underscores how patriarchy is harmful to both men and women; and addresses the disparity between the characteristics of male and female genders to leave us with an instructional book that teaches its audience to value compassion over aggression; love over violence; and gender equality as an achievable and worthwhile goal. Where Marston sought to usher in a real world matriarchy, Pérez instead uses matriarchal story concepts not to promote the rule of one gender, but rather encourage a society that ought to strive for and value gender equality. In her comic, Diana believes “her true destiny was to teach the world the Amazon way”—so too does her character exist in the real world, to show us the same (Pérez 183).

In her article, “Reading Wonder Woman’s Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation,” Mitra C. Emad asserts that comics are a place where one can learn about “America as a nation” and what she terms “mythologies of national identity” (954). While Emad leans heavily on Marston and how his writing relates to America in the 1940s, she also provides a useful examination of Pérez’s run, discovering characteristics of nation from depictions of Wonder Woman’s body. While, like Lepore and Hanley, Emad examines Wonder Woman’s feminism alongside her political history, she does this by scrutinizing the sexualization of the character. From this, she subsequently comes to address Wonder Woman’s community, the interactions between male and female characters, and how such gender dynamics reflect nationhood. Emad finds repeated examples where, as female power grows in society, Wonder Woman becomes all the more sexualized in her comics, and this in turn affects her relationships and her power (979). Emad uncovers the most examples in Wonder Woman’s 1970s reboot,²¹ and comes to the conclusion that, whenever female power grows in the real world to threaten male power (for instance, during the women’s lib movement), Wonder Woman is depicted in a hypersexual manner to “reign in” her power and appeal to male pleasure (982).

In applying her work to Pérez, we find that sexualized imagery of Diana is essentially nonexistent. Pérez goes to great lengths in his artwork to articulate his heroines without objectification, as we saw in the Amazonian birth scene and in the Heracles scenes. Emad’s work supports this view, especially when she explains that “Wonder Woman’s toned and muscular body, her determined expression, and her

²¹ Wherein Wonder Woman underwent a “bold new direction,” lost her powers, and became a martial artist. It was an unsuccessful time period for the book, to say the least. See Hanley for a detailed overview.

functional costume all appealed to an increasing female readership” during his run, and that this “aligned femininity with physical power” (974). If anything, the opposite of the trend is true for Pérez—Wonder Woman’s body is drawn with veneration; meanwhile, Heracles’ maniacal countenance belies and denigrates his power, and Zeus appears lecherous, not omnipotent, in his loincloth. He further disrupts the tendency of appealing to men over women by having Diana prevail over her would-be sexual assailant and even reform her mother’s abuser. But the art is Emad’s focus, and from it she concludes that Pérez’s *Wonder Woman* espouses a brand of femininity that “will not be corrupted by too much power” (972). She agrees that Pérez’s rebooted origin myth “put women’s power into sharp relief” and that it created “a level of social criticism new to mainstream comics” (971). While I disagree that such social criticism was “new” (Marston had done so as far back as the beginning), I concur that the strength of Pérez’s *Wonder Woman* lies in a venerated Diana and her mission toward gender equality, particularly as sprung from her matriarchal origin.

As a side effect of demonstrating Wonder Woman’s national/political connection and significance, Emad shows how the injection of femininity and female agency into the *Wonder Woman* narrative empowers all of its characters, while male presence is often detrimental to female power and autonomy—that the tension of masculine power versus feminine power is consistently “reconciled by asserting the masculine realm over the feminine” (979-980). This is a phenomenon witnessed time and again in *Wonder Woman*—from the ’50s when she becomes the lovesick puppy of Steve Trevor, to her depowering in the ’60s-’70s at the height of women’s liberation, to today. Unfortunately, while Pérez undercuts the trend, this is decidedly not so with *The New 52*. The

preference for masculinity and masculine power over femininity is front and center in Brian Azzarello's take on the character, and further reinforced in Grant Morrison's *Wonder Woman: Earth One*, where masculinity is touched with what Emad calls "the recurrent theme of bondage" (980). In examining these takes, we instead come to find a new trend—one where matriarchal worth is weakened, and Wonder Woman's power is sourced from two separate but related patriarchs.

Chapter IV.

Azzarello, Morrison, and The New 52

In his essay “Why are Superheroes Good? Comics and the Ring of Gyges,” Jeff Brenzel seeks to determine what makes a hero want to do good, and considers the importance of the superhero origin story in determining the driving force of the hero. He admits that origin stories are the touchstones that consistently link superheroes to heroic deeds, and that these origins are tweaked and modified throughout years of storytelling (152). However, Brenzel declares it a problem to attribute the origin story as the sole reason why superheroes act as they do or become who they are, as “no single event or handful of experiences, however profoundly impressed upon us, altogether determines the choices we make or the attitudes we adopt toward those experiences” (154). Neither people nor fictional characters are ever so simple, he argues (154). Wonder Woman constitutes a gray area here; Brenzel’s ideas both do and do not apply to her characterization and narrative. To understand this duality, Wonder Woman’s origin should be split into two separate concepts: her *birth* origin and her *heroic* origin.

Wonder Woman’s birth origin can be defined as the birth of her character in-story—that is, sculpted from clay and brought to life by the goddesses. Her heroic origin, however, operates on the idea that no character is a natural-born hero—there is a certain event or catalyst that causes the hero to emerge. Most would attribute the emergence of Steve Trevor as the impetus for Diana’s choice to leave Paradise Island, and that this acts as the moment of her heroic birth. Yet, realistically, there is no one specific event or one triggering experience that makes modern Wonder Woman a hero. Pérez conveys this idea best in his title; his Diana has already taken up the Wonder Woman mantle *before*

Steve crashes on Themyscira. She is already a hero to the Amazons and to the goddesses before Steve is even introduced. This narrative choice not only effectively eliminates a man as the “reason” for Wonder Woman to take on her mission; it also strengthens Wonder Woman as a character of resolve, who is determined to do good before she is given any excuse or reason to do so.²² It is already the whole of her experience as an Amazon that allows her to be heroic; the desire to do good is inherent, even despite growing up in a paradise where no “wrong” exists. On the psychology of Wonder Woman’s heroics, Travis Langley says there is no *personal trauma* that motivates her to be a hero for the sake of remedying it (1). He supports the view that Diana is innately a hero, and that she chooses to do good—it is that choice specifically that makes her different from other heroes, as Superman does not make the conscious choice to leave Krypton, and nor does Batman choose to witness his parents’ murder, “whereas Wonder Woman volunteers to give up everything she has ever known so that she can help (and see) the world” (72). In this way, Brenzel’s theory that the origin story should not be considered as the main cause for a hero certainly applies, in the sense that Wonder Woman’s heroic origin is not the product of one single event.

In terms of her birth origin, however, I disagree with Brenzel, as we have established that her clay origin is fundamental to who the character is—the fiber of her existence is in her matriarchal birth which feeds her purpose both narratively and in the greater context of her message to society. It is a unique and defining aspect of her character—one not shared with her DC counterparts. That her heroism is innate, not accidental, only adds another layer to this uniqueness; not only is her desire to do good

²² While Steve’s crash is the happy accident that allows Diana the *opportunity* to leave Themyscira, this is not the same as being the *reason* she leaves.

intrinsic, but that it stands separate from the tragedy and violence of her comic book colleagues makes her an exception to the general hero archetype. This being the case—if we are to view Wonder Woman as a unique character, with a unique purpose—then both her birth origin and her inherent heroism ought to be maintained. To alter either of these attributes so drastically as to erase them is to make Wonder Woman generic and redundant; she loses her core identity. One instance of changing Diana’s origin story is arguably just that—one instance, to be swept away or forgotten in following stories, as is the nature of comic books. But repeated origin editing—specifically for the goal of bestowing a father upon her—institutes a trend, and a trend that fundamentally misrepresents or misunderstands an established character is worth exploring. While *The New 52* saw Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang’s introduction of Zeus into Wonder Woman’s birth mythology, Azzarello was not alone in the quest to give Diana a father—years later, Grant Morrison commits the same origin retcon, but substitutes Hercules for Zeus. To understand the effects of such an alteration, whether positive or detrimental, a close reading of the material is necessary.

One of the immediate, striking aspects of Azzarello’s *New 52* reboot is in the direction the tone of the book takes. One need only read the volume titles—*Blood, Guts, Iron, War, Flesh, Bones*—to get a sense of mood. This is not the colorful energy of Marston, Pérez, or others before him—Azzarello’s run is dark both tonally and in terms of Chiang’s artwork; very much the opposite direction the title has historically taken. This change is evident from the first page, where Azzarello opens the book with a sinister and violent Apollo scene, followed by more gruesome violence from Hera. That the first issue opens on a male god, Apollo, as the center of the plot is noteworthy—in fact,

several supporting characters are introduced before Wonder Woman makes her debut a quarter of the way through the book. With her dearth of dialogue and lack of spotlight, she feels like a supporting character in her own title. Unlike Pérez or later Gail Simone, who use their debut issues to either re-tell or flesh out the early days of Diana and the Amazons, Azzarello does not center in on Diana's origin until several issues in, signaling that this is a different book. Azzarello focuses instead on a symbol of male power and authority in Apollo, who begins by talking about his father (immediate patriarchal emphasis) and transforming three women into oracles, whom he murders by the end of the issue after manipulating them for his own purpose. The issue ends with Apollo disposing of the oracles; he burns their bodies and chars their bones, so that the only remains of the women are piles of ash. This is the final panel of the final page, and it sends a grim message indeed, with strong misogynistic implications—the violence almost feels throwaway, like entertaining violence for violence's sake. While Pérez employed the same shocking and brutal tactics with the opening to his run, focusing on the violence of prehistoric man, this same method comes across differently with Azzarello—his display of violence does not appear to be making any deep point, other than to demonstrate that Apollo is a villain. Apollo's brutality against the oracles does not send the message that violence against women is abhorrent; it tells us only that this Apollo, unlike Pérez's version, is not an ally. Within a single issue, Azzarello establishes that patriarchal power is the focus of the book; uses violence as a trope for mood versus the comic's preceding tone of light and love; and sets up Wonder Woman to play second string to other characters in her own title.

Further structural choices and tonal problems exist elsewhere in the issue. Not only is a male god and his relationship with his father/quest for power made the center of the run, but when the audience finally does meet Diana, she is passive—asleep, naked. She is immediately sexualized, the male gaze of her introduction palpable. Every female character we meet in the issue, in fact, is sexualized in some way: Zola is only ever seen in her underwear throughout, and Hera is reduced to a pair of bare legs and ample cleavage—her face is never shown. Further, Diana’s first action when she wakes is not only violent, but it is violence directed toward another woman when she senses Zola’s intrusion and grabs her by the throat. What few lines of dialogue Diana speaks are equally concerning and grotesque when she says to Zola: “I can take that key right out of your hand. But I’d prefer if you gave it to me willingly” (Azzarello, *Blood*). It reads like the veiled threat of a domestic abuser; not the peaceful diplomat or loving daughter of the Amazons. This is sexually charged, arguably masculine phrasing—something an aggressive man about to take advantage of a woman might say. Comparing this introduction of Diana to those preceding *The New 52* reveals a revised character indeed, and Azzarello sets us up to understand that the energetic joy of Marston’s Diana or the innately moralistic and good-naturedness of Pérez should not be expected here. Azzarello’s Diana is tough above all, and following issues expose her tendency toward anger and conflict while consistently associating those qualities with strength and masculinity. While Wonder Woman’s significance is undeniably tied to her femininity and her female origin, which allow her to—as Jacob Held says—either mirror or challenge society’s norms and values, Azzarello’s run proposes otherwise (Held 2). Diana’s overall characterization throughout the book, coupled with the plot elements

surrounding the first issue—the focus on Apollo and his desire for power; demoting Diana to an objectified supporting character; the immediate tension and repeated physical conflict amongst female characters—imply and send the subconscious message that not only Wonder Woman herself, but her femininity and the power born of it are secondary to the plot at best. In contrast to the narrative tradition of *Wonder Woman*, Azzarello centers his run on his male characters—from Apollo and Zeus, to Hermes and Orion—suggesting that the story of *Wonder Woman* is or possibly should be a male one.

Azzarello's intentions become clearer once Diana's retconned origin is disclosed. While overall subtextual cues signal the importance of male presence and male power to the reader, Diana's *New 52* origin is blatant in its promotion of patriarchal attitudes. Azzarello tells the story of Diana's birth twice: first via Hermes, then by Hippolyta, and there is much to dissect from both. In Hermes' version, he explains to Zola:

According to legend, Hippolyta—the Queen—her womb was barren, yet she desperately wanted a child ... So on a moonless night, she fashioned a child out of clay ... and prayed to the gods for a miracle. When she was done, she fell exhausted ... into deep slumber ... and with the sun above, Hippolyta was awakened by her child. Wonder Woman is the perfect Amazon—no male seed created her. (Azzarello, *Blood*)

This is an interesting means of explaining Wonder Woman's initial origin, if not a curious decision to include it at all, given it is about to be undone. The tonal questions and underlying misogynistic implications continue here; first, that a man (Hermes) is telling the story, and second in the declaration that Hippolyta's "womb was barren." The absence of Amazon children was never about the functions of Hippolyta's internal body—the island simply lacked the physical existence of men required to complete the reproductive act. Azzarello takes this and twists it into being a personal physical flaw of Hippolyta, laying blame through the implication that there was some inherent failure

within her to produce a child. Further note the lack of involvement or reference to any female goddesses; instead, there is the sly reference to Diana being born “with the sun above”—a subtle nod once more to Apollo. This is again in contrast to what has typically been shown as Diana’s birth blessed by goddesses, under a full or hunter’s moon,²³ which ties Diana to Artemis and inspires her name. From this re-telling, Azzarello demonstrates that he understands the importance of Diana’s matriarchal origin—he underscores what makes her so special, so perfect, is that “no male seed” was involved in her creation. It makes her an ideal; a paragon of Amazonia. Yet, Azzarello introduces this fact only to subvert it. He is deliberate in re-writing and un-doing Diana’s “perfection”; no longer an ideal, and no longer a miracle, but merely the consequence of a sordid affair. It is arguably not a misunderstanding of who Wonder Woman is, then, so much as an aversion to it.²⁴ Azzarello seems to employ Zola to speak for him when she responds to Hermes’ tale with a tepid “that’s weird,” rather than any feeling of fascination toward so unique and compelling a story (Azzarello, *Blood*). Hermes’ tale and Zola’s reaction then sets up Azzarello to reveal his version of how *The New 52* Wonder Woman was created.

Told by Hippolyta, Diana’s revised origin disrupts all that had previously characterized Diana. She confesses Diana’s clay birth to be a lie, and under pressure to reveal the truth, explains:

Diana ... before there was you ... there was a man. No, there was more than a man. There was a god. THE god. There was Zeus. How did it start? Those are details I prefer to keep to myself, though we both agreed to deny the poets what could be their song for the ages ... that of the Queen of the Amazons ... and the King of the Gods. Dancing together ... no, that was a song ... we sang only to each other. He—we—were

²³ For a particularly unique rendition, see Gail Simone’s first story arc, “The Circle.”

²⁴ See Trina Robbins’ quote from page 17 regarding male creators’ dislike of Wonder Woman.

glorious. Strength supporting strength ... sinews entwined ... absolute control ... given up. Our passion left me pregnant, and to guard that secret, I left him. He did not follow. Quickly I learned, possessing a god has scant to do with keeping him. (Azzarello, *Blood*)

Hippolyta reasons that lying about Diana's real birth was necessary in order to protect her from Hera, who would have killed Diana had she known of the affair. This is a poor imitation of pre-*New 52* Hippolyta, who wore truth on her sleeve and ran from no threat, god or otherwise.²⁵ That Diana, established always as a paragon of truth, becomes born of a lie is further insulting to the character and her history; it destroys a basic tenet of her personality—that she is born of a matriarch, and that she possesses the power of truth. Now she is born of a patriarch, too foolish and naïve to discern the lie, lacking in her former “wisdom of Athena.” A comparable analogy would be uncovering that Batman's parents never died and have been secretly living in Gotham. For such a thing to be hidden from Batman is laughable—it would require his detective skills gone absent, and would render his entire purpose undone. These are but the obvious, surface-level problems in the decision to negate Diana's matriarchal birth; digging deeper into Hippolyta's words reveals an intense patriarchal emphasis and reliance on masculinity, which changes Diana's makeup as a character as well as the root of her power.

Aside from the inclusion of Zeus, the most obvious callout to male presence in Diana's revised origin is Hippolyta's very first words to her daughter: “Before there was you ... there was a man.” The message is not exactly subtle: man comes before woman. Azzarello has the *Queen of the Amazons*—the *matriarch* ruler of the island of *women*—confess that before her *daughter* was so much as a thought, a man came before her. Zeus was in Hippolyta's life—was important to her—before Diana. This is a shocking

²⁵ Recall Pérez's Hippolyta, who stood up against Zeus to protect her daughter from his wrath.

subversion of the prevailing narrative and mythology of Wonder Woman, and feels almost condescending or dismissive of the predominantly female readers Azzarello surely knows he has. Note that not once throughout Hippolyta's telling of the story does she indicate she ever actually *desired* a child, or that Diana's birth was even a happy coincidence. She instead stresses the passion between her and Zeus—their glory and poeticism, and the beautiful dance of their “strength supporting strength,” the emphasis suggesting this Hippolyta values strength and control over the vulnerability and compassion of Pérez's Hippolyta. Upon disclosing that she left Zeus to protect Diana, Hippolyta reveals her desire for him to follow her, and laments her inability to “keep” the king she had “possessed.” The story concludes, then, on Hippolyta's remorse for losing Zeus; ending her speech in such a way indicates she is more regretful about her inability to keep a man than she is for conducting the affair, hurting Hera or the Amazons, or for lying. This leaves a story with a steady emphasis on a patriarch king and a longing for his strength and presence—it is Hippolyta's desire for *Zeus*, not her desire for *Diana*, which leads to Wonder Woman's birth. The relationship between mother and daughter that has been, to this point, so essential to *Wonder Woman* is extinguished as a result.

Although relational conflict can be necessary to create drama, in this instance, to disrupt the mother/daughter connection and narrative is to eliminate the well-established feminine bonds of power within Wonder Woman. Azzarello illustrates this disruption in several ways—first, in Diana's response to the revelation of her birth when she says: “Mother ... Ha ... For the first time I can call you that knowing your blood is in me ... You're so wrong. I'm a lie. You're a fool. And you made one out of me” (Azzarello, *Blood*). While Diana's attachment to her mother is emotionally severed, Azzarello

further suggests that Hippolyta's parentage is somehow "lesser" when Diana is made of clay—that only through blood is Diana made significant. While some re-tellings specifically depict Hippolyta shedding blood as she molds the clay, such as in Simone's run, previous iterations never particularly emphasized this. Though Azzarello connects mother and daughter through blood, he splits their emotional bond through lies and conspiracy. If the narrative disconnect is not obvious enough, Chiang visually symbolizes it in his illustration of Hippolyta, who suddenly possesses straight blonde hair as opposed to her long-established black, wavy hair, similar to her daughter's. Where they once even looked alike, now is another divergence. To complete the destruction of Hippolyta and Diana's relationship, by the end of the issue, Hippolyta is turned to stone and effectively removed from the remainder of Azzarello's run until her statue is reanimated as a golem in his penultimate issue (Azzarello, *Bones*). Whether Hippolyta returns fully to life or reconciles with Diana is not addressed. Ultimately, eliminating this matriarchal bond opens the door for further, more detrimental character changes throughout *The New 52*, especially those that infuse the character with patriarchal power and male influence over the feminine.

If the erasure of the mother/daughter relationship is not enough on its own, Azzarello appears intent on further disconnecting Diana from anything stereotypically "feminine," specifically by replacing female bonds with male ones. Further within the issue, Azzarello addresses the other Amazons on the island and depicts them as plotting against their own princess, whom they no longer view as being worthy of the Amazon identity. They define themselves exclusively as warriors, viewing death in battle as the greatest honor. This is a simplistic, reductive characterization of the Amazons, and a far

cry from the patient and peaceful sisters who held Diana with utmost loyalty and esteem, who always chose compassion over violence. Recall that these are the same warlike qualities railed against by Marston and Pérez as being harmful to masculinity—the very attributes the Amazons were created to counteract. Azzarello instead imbues both the Amazons and Diana with these qualities, the hostile attitudes amongst the sisters creating a rift between them. Azzarello eventually removes Diana from Themyscira, thus detaching her not only in terms of metaphorical bonds broken, but also through physical detachment. This ultimately leads to another, more disparaging revelation about the Amazons and their past in the next volume: the audience finds that what appear to be automatons manning Hephaestus' forge are actually human beings ... all male ... all brothers ... all the discarded children of the Amazons (Azzarello, *Guts*). Where the Amazons originally could not conceive children, Hephaestus mocks Diana for believing what amounts to fairytales, and explains:

Wonder Woman, your people, thrice a century ... go on raids. Like pirates, they take to the sea—mortal vessels are their targets—and they have their way. It must seem like a dream to most men ... beautiful women, offering themselves ... but it quickly turns to a nightmare. Their lives ... drained from them. Triumphant, the Amazons return to Paradise Island, and wait. Nine months later, some celebrate the birth of a daughter ... some don't. (Azzarello, *Guts*)

Not only does this completely undo Wonder Woman's backstory and the mythology of the Amazons, but it makes Diana out to be ignorant or naïve at best. Neither does the decision make sense narratively, in that young children are never seen on Themyscira, and the Amazons would not have been able to hide newborns—whether male or female—from Diana. At its worst, this alteration takes the once peace-seeking, love-centered Amazons and turns them into the very rapists and murderers they once sought to redeem; the women who once taught Diana to fight the forces of hate and oppression

become those same forces. One must ask what purpose so fundamental a change serves, and what it adds to the myth. As Diana's brothers serve little to no function through the remainder of Azzarello's run, establishing no relationship with Diana and thrown aside in favor of her becoming God of War,²⁶ there appears to be little reason for their inclusion. If Azzarello sought to give Diana brothers or simply male family members, he accomplishes this with characters such as Lennox, Milan, and even War himself. To ruin the legend of the Amazons or to confuse them as misandrists might serve the more immediate plot goal of reimagining Diana's family and "flipping the script" for the sake of surprise, but these reasons seem superficial. Both Diana's patriarchal *New 52* origin coupled with the subsequent transformation of the Amazons into violent predators not only hurts Diana as an icon of love, equality, and femininity—they also make her born of tragic choice, and infuses tragedy into an origin that was at its essence miraculous, joyful, peaceful, and empowering. To replace these sentiments with bitterness, belligerence, and lies is short-sighted, serving only a temporary storyline but leaving lasting narrative effects on the characters and the title for years to come.

Azzarello essentially reconstructs Wonder Woman from an archetype of feminine love power into a redundant, combative foot soldier of the patriarchy. Gone is the matron deity who creates her own female race imbued with the power of love to defeat male violence and promote peace and equality. In its place is a Diana neither born of nor blessed by the goddesses—instead, her power and abilities are inherited from Zeus. With

²⁶ Though Diana as God of War is a development aching to be explored separately and in more depth, it is worth noting as a symptom of the overall characterization of Diana as warlike and angry throughout Azzarello's run—the antithesis of what Wonder Woman has historically represented. This anger is markedly tied to the emphasis on patriarchal power and aggression as a result of being Zeus' daughter. It also manifests itself in other ways; for instance, the prominence of her auto-summoned war swords.

Azzarello's final revelation that Baby Zeke is Zeus reborn, but no relationship built between father and daughter, nor bonds made between sister and brothers, Wonder Woman's reconstruction seems pointless, existing not to serve her, but the male characters of the book. Moreover, this leaves a Wonder Woman who lacks the capacity to address gender relations or question the status quo—at its worst, the book asks no permanent questions nor encourages any lasting introspection about ourselves, about male/female relationships, or about the world. By the run's final issue, *The New 52 Wonder Woman* upholds a salacious sex story in favor of the matriarchal origin that was radical and innovative both at the time of its publication and even still today.

Although they may appear irrelevant to the concept of Diana's birth origin, Wonder Woman's choice of weapons are particularly symbolic of the changes undergone from Marston to Azzarello. In his 2017 essay "The Lasso of Truth?" James Edwin Mahon uses the symbolism of Wonder Woman's lasso to discuss feminine versus masculine power. Mahon houses his discussion within the context of both the lasso's and Wonder Woman's creation by Marston, explaining that Marston created the character with his theories of love and women's inducement (allure) in mind, and that these theories are reflected in the lasso's abilities. Mahon's main point—that the lasso acts as a metaphor for women's power over men, and that to depower it would equate to "defeminizing" Wonder Woman—further reinforces that Wonder Woman's power is rooted in her femininity, and that to change such power is to change her character at an elemental level (186). Because it is given to Wonder Woman by Aphrodite and blessed with her love, "to wield the magic lasso is to have the power of Aphrodite—to *become* Aphrodite, as it were" (182). Note the similarity in the gifting of the girdle to Hippolyta.

We see this theme carried over with Pérez, where Hephaestus forges the lasso and Hestia grants it “rein o’er the fires of truth—that the hearts and thoughts of all men may be opened” (Pérez 47). That it is made from the Girdle of Gaea means Wonder Woman’s weapon is doubly infused with femininity/female power under Pérez. Comparing this to *The New 52*, where Hephaestus forges the lasso on his own, not from Gaea and with no goddess’s blessing, it thus possesses neither power. Hephaestus even mocks it as not being a proper weapon (Azzarello, *Guts*). Just as the kingly masculinity of Zeus and his offspring is showcased and emphasized over Wonder Woman’s female roots, the lasso also reflects this lack of female power in Azzarello’s run. Further, Wonder Woman rarely deigns to use the lasso, having been granted the ability to conjure swords at will as part of her emergence as a demigod. As swords are phallic symbols of male power and propensity for war, it is not a stretch to say that masculinity becomes Wonder Woman’s preferred weapon—an extension of the patriarchal power now in her blood.

To be fair, Azzarello’s *Wonder Woman* run does get some things right when it comes to issues of gender. In “The God of War is Wearing What? Gender in the New 52,” Sarah K. Donovan examines Azzarello’s challenges to conventional gender roles and gender stereotypes. She supports my observations on the hostility of the female characters, and makes a strong point about masculine aggression, agreeing that such aggression afflicts Wonder Woman and the Amazons. However, Donovan ascertains that, while there are several clichéd or one-dimensional depictions of gender and womanhood in the comic—for instance, characterizing Hera only in relation to her husband, or portraying her only in terms of how desirable she is—examples of unconventional gender roles also abound (22). Hera, for instance, is brought full-circle

by the conclusion of Azzarello's run and becomes an "active agent who would lead and defend others" (23). I would add that, although Hera is objectified and depowered in the book, her deconstruction serves a purpose when she emerges a stronger, more fully developed character who has learned and changed in the end. Unfortunately, Hera's example does not extend to others—where Donovan argues that both Hippolyta and the Amazons also enjoy the same disruption to break gender stereotypes, I must strongly disagree. Donovan makes it a point to say that Hippolyta is physically equal during sex with Zeus and exhibits agency in her decision to be with him (25). While this is an excellent example of her autonomy, we must consider that it comes at the cost of a one-dimensional portrayal of her sexuality as heteronormative.²⁷ And, while she gains sexual agency, she loses reproductive agency in that Diana is a consequence, not a conscious choice or goal she actively pursues. Donovan further argues that the Amazons subvert gender norms in being aggressors in war (a traditionally male role) and rejecting man's world (27). Yet, I believe this is less a subversion of gender so much as it is a misuse of the function of the Amazons. Warmongering and murder is not necessary for the Amazons to challenge gender roles—they are already inherently a disruption of gender roles in their very formation and existence as a self-sustaining, all-female community. To make them violent is unwarranted and even counterproductive to this function. Thus, despite being progressive in some examples regarding gender, Azzarello sabotages himself by either not pushing boundaries far enough (Hippolyta's sexuality) or pushing them so far as all meaning is lost (Amazons as murderers). This results in a book that is geared more toward reinforcing stereotypes, not dismantling them. Former *Wonder*

²⁷ Relegated to an island utopia of women, that Hippolyta would desire Zeus over another woman is not groundbreaking or modern to 2011 audiences, and most certainly does not challenge gender norms.

Woman writer and artist Phil Jimenez puts it best when he says that this Wonder Woman “plays into the fantasies and culturally sanctioned fears of anything overtly feminine of the predominantly straight male audience the comic industry serves instead of reshaping them. She ... buttresses the conventional wisdom as opposed to bucking it. Her otherness, her queerness, is all but erased” (qtd. in Cocca 101).

Evidently, Azzarello is not alone in this fear of asserting Wonder Woman’s feminine essence, as Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette also champion masculine elements over the feminine in their 2016 standalone original graphic novel, *Wonder Woman: Earth One*. This project was originally born of Morrison’s writing in the 2008 DC crossover event, *Final Crisis*; in talking about that event to *Newsarama*, Morrison says he “always sensed something slightly bogus” about the character, and that he “always felt there was something oddly artificial about Wonder Woman, something not like a woman at all” (Brady). Morrison explains that from researching her early comics, he sought to fix the “problems” and contradictions of the character, and wound up with the material that would become *Earth One*. What Morrison means regarding the “artificiality” of Wonder Woman can be inferred from a close reading of *Earth One*, which ultimately exposes her birth origin as the “problem” Morrison seeks to remedy.

Like Marston before him, Morrison opens his book with the Amazons, before Diana is born, and much can be deduced from the features of this scene—specifically, that it is intended for a heterosexual male audience. The first page is an immediate, shocking, tone-setting spread of Hippolyta shackled, on her knees, with Hercules looming above her shouting “To heel, bitch of Hercules!” (Morrison, *Wonder Woman: Earth One*). From the beginning, then, the audience’s first encounter with the Amazons—with

a female character, period—is Hippolyta on her knees as Hercules subjugates her. This is not dissimilar from Azzarello’s opening of Apollo abusing the oracles, and sets a similar mood with its bleakness and dark, muted colors. Paquette’s art plays the scene in what I would argue is the wrong direction—where Pérez once made his audience feel empathy and pity for Hippolyta, emphasizing her tears and her terror, Paquette instead chooses this moment to sexualize her. We next get a double-page spread where Hercules yanks on Hippolyta’s chains and gloats, and over the course of these panels, Paquette draws her in overtly sexual poses—her back arched, her chest out, her lips pouting, her rear end flaunted. This is not a matter of subjective interpretation; Paquette clearly sexualizes the violence being performed against Hippolyta, giving one the immediate sense that—despite the book’s flowery dedications otherwise—this story was made with and for a male gaze.

Though he claims to have researched Marston’s run as well as Marston’s intentions, Morrison—like Azzarello—appears to sidestep the idea of Wonder Woman being an instructional guide against toxic masculinity, meant to promote female empowerment. Hence Hippolyta’s sexualization should, perhaps, come as no surprise, given the front cover of the book alone—instead of a powerful, compelling pose, readers are greeted with a fetishized, bondage Wonder Woman, and this signals all one need know regarding the creative team’s objectives. Paquette, an artist known for his “cheesecake” art style, is a curious choice for a modern *Wonder Woman*, and he does not alter his artistic approach at any point through the book. Matthew William Brake, writing about Morrison’s *Final Crisis*, argues in support of the use of Wonder Woman as a sexualized fetish character, and applies this same observation to *Earth One*. Brake

essentially claims that “All Morrison had done [...] was depict Wonder Woman in a way that fits with many male fans’ sexual fantasies” (77). Brake misses the point that Wonder Woman was not born for and should not exist to serve fans’ sexual appetites, male or otherwise. He exhibits the ease with which male privilege allows for the dismissal and dysfunction of the character, and in so doing encompasses one of my largest criticisms of Morrison’s run. Brake’s article and Wonder Woman’s sexualization in *Earth One* offer solid examples of Emad’s aforementioned writings when she says that Wonder Woman becomes more sexualized in her comics in response to female acquisitions of power in society.²⁸ Even when Morrison ends his scene with Hippolyta wrapping her chains around Hercules’ neck (Princess Leia-style), killing him and liberating her sisters in the process, this act still misses the mark—although Hercules is a defeated villain, it confuses the message when his actions are portrayed in a manner meant to arouse, and leaves no room for reconciliation or lessons learned. From its opening pages to its last, Morrison and Paquette are constant in their efforts to attract a male audience—but unlike Marston, it is not for the sake of acclimating them to powerful women. Rather, with its repeated desire to infuse masculine elements into the story and sexualize its female characters, *Earth One* comes across as a strong endorsement of patriarchal power. This patriarchal endorsement is at its height when Diana’s origin is revealed.

Alongside its alteration of Diana’s birth, *Earth One* also employs some of the same tactics used by Azzarello to instill conflict into the story—for instance, portraying

²⁸ In a year that saw the first female presidential nominee of a major political party in Hillary Clinton; the first African-American woman to lead a \$100 million live-action film in Ava DuVernay; the first female Librarian of Congress in Carla Hayden; and so many more accomplishments throughout politics, business, and media, it is a stunning phenomenon that Wonder Woman becomes more objectified and/or less powerful in her comic, in repeated defiance of the zeitgeist.

the Amazons as killers and misandrists. An even greater similarity, however, is in the tension Morrison carves between mother and daughter. It is as a result of this strained relationship that Diana finally forces Hippolyta—literally, with the lasso wrapped around her hands—to reveal the truth about her birth. Hippolyta explains how she brought together the egg from her own womb with Hercules’ seed and seasoned it with her “fury” to create Diana. She says: “You were my revenge on Hercules, Diana. That his line would yield no sons, only daughters bred to conquer and subdue Man’s World. Of my anger you were born [...] you were made to be my weapon. I crafted you to be a scourge, a destroyer.” Far removed from the diplomatic and compassionate Diana so carefully crafted before, in an illuminating 2016 interview with *The Daily Beast*, Morrison expounds on his ideas for her:

I wanted Diana to have some kind of masculine element because I thought, well, most girls have a dad. (Laughs.) It is quite important. But this is my big tradeoff, because I love the idea that Hippolyta just created her out of nothing, that Diana is a solely female creation. But at the same time, I wanted a lot more tension and drama and a kind of struggle [...] The idea that Wonder Woman’s dad is a superhero of the ancient days, Hercules, I thought really quite resonated: a strongman as Wonder Woman’s dad. (Leon)

Much is divulged regarding Morrison’s view of Wonder Woman in this short answer.

While he seems to understand the importance of Diana as the only “solely female creation” in comics, he is not unwilling to erase it for the sake of injecting a “masculine element,” which he deems more important than a female one. An affront to the source material, Morrison appears either oblivious or indifferent to the inherent irony of valuing masculinity as the centerpiece of a *Wonder Woman* story. By giving Wonder Woman a father, he demotes her to one of “most girls” at best; at worst, he gives her only the second most toxic “strongman” patriarch of the mythos as a father, and is unmoved by

the underlying problem of glorifying Hippolyta's rapist. Moreover, that Hippolyta is the instigator in an act of revenge means that not only is Diana born of a man who enslaved and abused her mother, but that she is bred from such tragic and gruesome circumstances takes the joy and light out of the character's original creation and taints it with anger, darkness, and sin. When, in Pérez's run, a redeemed Heracles asks if Diana was born of his "seed," Hippolyta instantly shuts him down (Pérez 333). Heracles responds: "I am glad, Hippolyta—truly! 'Twould have been a mockery for such a beautiful child to be born from so ugly an act" (333). Pérez understood both the significance of Diana's origin and the underlying consequences of what Heracles as her father would imply. Morrison's work not only abuses and belittles such sentiment,²⁹ but moreover results in a Wonder Woman not born for a mission of peace and equality among the sexes, but one intended to enact vengeance and spread hate. In the end, the audience is spared from the potential of anything more sinister when Hippolyta admits that Diana is too good to be a tool for her rage. The book concludes with Diana seeking to be "more than I was made to be," but the masculine and fetishistic focus, coupled with the toxic addition of Hercules and Hippolyta's grotesque fixation on revenge do enough damage to Wonder Woman as a concept of female empowerment that she is no longer recognizable as the same character.

Like Azzarello's *New 52* take, Morrison's *Earth One* is not entirely without value. Morrison writes in some excellent throwbacks to Marston that do not damage his legacy or his message—he upholds some of the more fun and lighthearted aspects of the original book, such as the inclusion of the kangas, the magic mirror, and the explosive energy of

²⁹ Azzarello and Morrison further lose the plot in surrender to a derivative Madonna-whore dichotomy, where Diana is a Madonna born of either a willing whore in Azzarello's Hippolyta, or an unwilling one in Morrison's.

the Holliday Girls. Additionally, Paquette's illustration of Paradise Island is beautiful, colorful, and technologically savvy in a modern sense, while still retaining its magical elements. Even more, the book does not shy away from depicting lesbian relationships, and this alone gives the story a more modern feel. Yet, this representation of gender and sexual identity would be even more powerful were it not blatantly geared toward seducing a male audience.³⁰ The choice to portray Steve Trevor as a black man also introduces another layer of social commentary to the story, even if it feels at times that Morrison is trying to tackle too much, as he only briefly touches on race and does not explore it deeply enough as to add anything significant to the gender/race relations or identity politics of the book. Thus, where Morrison's take on Wonder Woman is progressive in certain areas, that enterprise is ultimately lost in a book that, once again, values the men in Diana's life over Diana herself, perpetuating the havoc wreaked by her father as necessary for the physical power she gains from him—a power she has never previously needed throughout her history.

While the general discourse on Wonder Woman tends to focus mostly on her role as an icon, one writer, Neal Curtis, does the closest work to my own in addressing Diana's origin changes head-on. In 2017's article, "Wonder Woman's Symbolic Death: On Kinship and the Politics of Origins," Curtis contends that Wonder Woman's matriarchal origin made her a "singular phenomenon" not only in comic books, but as a character within fiction, period (307). Curtis touches on some of the same points as I do, especially with regard to the Pérez era, but does so only in a brief, over-arching manner

³⁰ While there is an endearing tenderness between Diana and Mala, it is bookended by masculine performances of aggression, fetishized bondage, and titillating artwork that counterweigh any gesture toward inclusiveness.

and does not employ close readings of the source material. Still, there is much in his writing with which to agree—particularly when he claims that “the undoing of Wonder Woman’s heritage removes the one female superhero that makes the most radical challenge to patriarchy at a time when patriarchal assumptions and privilege are being so effectively challenged” (310). This is a key point in discussing Wonder Woman’s retconned origin and its significance today. Yet, while Curtis preoccupies himself with the idea of patriarchal norms, he does not advance those ideas by examining issues of gender and power as in-depth as Emad or Currie do. And while I agree that the “problem” of Wonder Woman’s *New 52* origin certainly lies in patriarchal norms, Curtis’ main point is that patriarchal systems do not allow for what he terms “an alternative source for social norms” (308). This is altogether separate from what I believe is the chief issue at play, which is more about *power* and *identity*—that is, by making Zeus the source of Wonder Woman’s power, her entire identity is distorted, and she becomes an altogether changed character.

Additionally, the brevity of Curtis’ writing is heightened by his choice of narrative examples, and this is another area where we differ. Curtis is succinct in summarizing what we see with Azzarello, where in order for female characters to convey strength, they must “mimic patriarchal representations” of it, and that this was what Wonder Woman’s original birth “expressly denied” (308). However, Curtis does not extend this argument to Morrison, seeming to give him a free pass. In order to illustrate his point that retconning Wonder Woman’s matriarchal origin highlights the strength of patriarchal systems, Curtis discusses Greg Rucka’s *The Hiketeia* alongside Morrison’s *Earth One*. This comes across as counterproductive, as *The Hiketeia* never addresses

Wonder Woman's birth—Curtis instead uses it as an example of Wonder Woman's existence in opposition of law. More importantly, in his use of *Earth One*, Curtis reaches a woeful, contradictory point to his original premise and instead suggests that Hippolyta's act of retaliation somehow negates or remedies the loss of matriarchal weight in Diana's birth. Curtis stresses the importance of Hippolyta's autonomy, that her conscious decision to have Diana is an "essential component of Wonder Woman's political significance" (314). While autonomy is a worthy notion, I contend that the addition of a father to Diana's origin is still the insertion of patriarchy, whether Hippolyta conceives Diana deliberately here or not. When Hippolyta chooses to have a child out of revenge against Hercules, Diana becomes a weapon born of her mother's anger toward a man. Hippolyta's act, then, while defiant and empowering to *her* character, results in a Wonder Woman born physically of man and metaphorically of man in that her entire birth is a direct response to Hercules. Yet, Curtis calls *Earth One* "a resolution of sorts," because it keeps intact a "feral" aspect of the Amazons and their wild independence (317-318). This argument in favor of the feral appears and ends abruptly; Curtis does not delve into why this attribute is so important, or even particularly relevant. His article ends on a note that seems to cherry-pick or compromise when the significance of Wonder Woman's feminism and message of equality should not. While Curtis' main ideas are important, his reasoning is flawed and ripe for criticism, as I believe it is clear that patriarchal institutions still influence and overrule female autonomy/female power in *The New 52*, resulting in harm to Wonder Woman's identity and her strength of character.

In the end, *The New 52* and *Earth One* disregard the spirit of Wonder Woman's female-centered story in favor of patriarchal representations of family, thereby starting a

peculiar trend. Azzarello says about his take on Diana's new origin and the gods: "She's got a family now, you know? She's got a dysfunctional family now, and it's not all women" (qtd. in Darowski and Rush 228). Such obvious disdain from Azzarello coupled with Morrison's vocal decision to inject masculinity into his story suggests a matriarchal family/society is inconsequential or unworthy of development. This raises the question once again: does the inclusion of a father or the overall addition of masculine presence add anything of value to Wonder Woman's myth? Or, as Campbell professes, do signals become crossed and the original function lost? I believe the latter, that these changes are myopic—they do greater and longer-lasting harm than they do any good for the immediate story, diluting not only Wonder Woman's relationship to feminism and love, but to truth, of which she is meant to be the epitome. Most critically, these choices were made to appeal to the lowest common denominator; they disconnect the narrative from having relevance to present reality, as any current issues of importance in the social and political sphere—sexual assault, gender equality, gender representation—and in our collective consciousness are stripped away from the book when it is consigned to fostering patriarchy without adding to or reinterpreting Wonder Woman's social message. Thus do Morrison and Azzarello seem to mistake devastation for originality, damage for nuance. In his inception of Diana in the 1940s, Marston was resolute—by encouraging girls to claim their inherent power, and by preparing boys for the potential of a world run by women, Wonder Woman was meant to question and change the status quo of the day. Yet, decades later, *The New 52* encompasses another instance of reductive revisionism within Wonder Woman's publication history, its effect already taking hold in

the mainstream as seen in the 2017 *Wonder Woman* film ... where Diana is revealed to be the daughter of Zeus.

Chapter V.

Conclusion: Wonder Woman in the 21st Century

The preceding pages exist in service to one main question: is Wonder Woman relevant today? I believe the answer to be an unequivocal yes, and more so than she has been in at least a generation.

Literature, entertainment media, and popular culture all have an influence on society and politics, and vice versa—what we ingest as a culture has a capacity to and history of growing hearts and minds toward change; to accept the new; to be better. In our current climate, where much of what we see and do is hyper-politicized, the media we consume is increasingly judged by the political and social messages they extol. Wonder Woman in particular is and always has been inextricably linked to politics and pop culture, whether through the suffragist roots of her creation in the 1940s, her reduction to the domestic norms of the 1950s, or her adoption as a feminist icon during the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s. Now, in what seems to be a cresting fourth wave of feminism, her popularity continues to surge, whether as a cartoon character for young children; as a superhero blockbuster film; or as a banner symbol of female strength, carried in the march for equality with ever-raised fists. In considering all of this, Wonder Woman’s significance can and is reaching heights it has not reached in decades.

Scholar Kelli Stanley says that, in terms of media, comics in particular are “cultural revelations” that expose an overall idea of who we are as a culture by expressing the thoughts or imaginations that power our sense of identity (143). If this is so—if comic books tell us who we are as well as what we can be—then the work done by

Marston and Pérez should be viewed as groundworks laid with alarming purpose. Marston's purpose was to empower girls and to ready boys for the impending matriarchy. Pérez's was to make us contemplate ourselves and think seriously on the social setup of our society. Together, their works hold strategic and cultural visions—they are blocks upon which to build, not structures to reinvent for reinventions' sake. To tear their Wonder Woman down is to lose her meaning, and to lose her meaning is to create a homogenized, one-dimensional character with little purpose beyond that of entertainment. Wonder Woman has been and can be more than what she was demoted to within *The New 52* if only we follow the roadmap they laid for her.

We know *The New 52* came about as a result of DC's decision to reboot their line in order to update their heroes and make them more enjoyable to today's audiences. For Wonder Woman especially, it was a conscious effort to make her relevant; yet, this effort widely misses the mark in bestowing any relatability or depth of meaning upon her. In 2016, several years after *The New 52*, Wonder Woman celebrated her 75th anniversary. To survive another seventy-five years will certainly require that the character continue to change and evolve in order that she remain pertinent, but I believe this should not be undertaken in the manner elected by Azzarello, who writes the character through a lens of patriarchy and rigid, binary sexuality; nor should she grow in the manner adopted by Morrison, who sees her femininity as expendable. In place of the methods seen within *The New 52*, where Wonder Woman kowtows to a predominantly male cast and the character becomes ineffective at challenging societal standards, rather—and paradoxically—one could look to the past for inspiration on how to move forward.

We see that Wonder Woman is most effective as an agent of change and most powerful—both in terms of her power as a character within her narrative and her power as a greater cultural figure—when she takes an active stance for feminist goals, both by promoting her female community and by using the male characters of her book as allies or as atoned adversaries, cured of their violence and anger. This is certainly evident in Marston’s original run, but it is especially so with Pérez. Scholar D.R. Hammontree says that Pérez’s run was so successful in part because he and the editorial team at the time used feminist language (and imagery) to “engage the dominant values of patriarchy”—creating a means of discussion that “provoke readers to reflection” (172-173). I enthusiastically agree, and would take it even further to say that this is the heart of what the *Wonder Woman* title should be—a critical, thought-provoking book, in the same vein of its colleagues, *Action Comics* (where Superman teaches us there is always a right and a wrong) and *Detective Comics* (where Batman leads us to question the moral responsibility of our choices). Looking at Marston and Pérez for guidance, one clear area in which to maintain Wonder Woman’s relevance today is in her continued fight for the advancement of feminism. Wonder Woman can and should be employed to promote awareness of and take collective action against gender stereotypes, specifically in terms of toxic masculinity and of gender/sexuality being seen as binary. While both of these ideas have been either hinted at or addressed in some form or another in *Wonder Woman* comics of the past, they need to be developed further as theory and social discourse on these topics continue to progress.

In terms of feminism, there is tremendous work to be done for women in the real world—and *Wonder Woman* can provide the pathway and the moral compass to lead us

to equality—but beyond this, the route to success calls for men to embrace her and her ideas just as much as women. Wonder Woman fails as a character if she stands *only* for women. Of course, this alludes to what Marston himself sought—his goal was to show boys that it is acceptable and even preferable to be in support of women; that women have the capacity and power to be equals, and that their authority ought to be embraced. Pérez took this foundation and added to it the idea that masculinity, when taken to an extreme, under a patriarchal system, is as harmful to men as it is to women, but that men can both be freed of this and socialized to grow out of the harmful behaviors taught to them.³¹ To embrace such change results in a better world for all. In taking these ideas to their next logical step, one might consider the current zeitgeist, wherein the term “toxic masculinity” is a frequent topic of debate. Note that what is covered by this term does not equate so much to traditionally “masculine” qualities such as physical strength. Rather, toxic masculinity refers to the subtle and more nefarious behaviors subconsciously learned at a young age, which results in aggressive tendencies, an inability to express emotion, and the like.³² We saw that Pérez’s run addressed toxic masculinity in its own way, and although his message is still relevant, at over thirty years old now, it could certainly use updating or reiterating. Pérez dealt with ideas that were still being developed and/or not thoroughly explored in comics before; in 2019, our overall awareness of social issues regarding gender is greater, and the discussion is nonstop—not only in media, but amongst one another, over the internet, or in the public

³¹ Zeus and Heracles aside, another solid example of the different ways in which Marston and Pérez both tackle the same issue is with their differing uses of Steve Trevor. Under Marston, Trevor is forever surprised and impressed by Wonder Woman’s strength to the point of being love-struck; under Pérez, he is a natural and modern ally with no ulterior romantic motive, accepting Wonder Woman’s agency without question.

³² For more information, see the recently released APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men: <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/boys-men-practice-guidelines.pdf>

sphere. Now is the opportunity to bring these ideas back to *Wonder Woman*, to help us as we continue to think critically on what it means to be human beings existing with one another in the world.

Further, where Pérez's examples were specific to dominant gods eager to exercise their power—Zeus and Heracles—it is the “average” man who is arguably most affected by toxic masculinity. A cast of more “common” characters grappling with issues of masculinity and femininity and how these constructs affect their lives and relationships with Wonder Woman could provide another, wholly separate avenue for exploration. As research continues to emerge regarding how taught masculinity reduces empathy,³³ who better to address these topics—to help forge a way forward—than comic books' most empathetic and compassionate character? In a world where women are shouting #MeToo; where two of nine U.S. Supreme Court Justices are accused sexual predators; where a television commercial promoting the idea that men can be better is met with uproar;³⁴ it further emphasizes the radical importance of Wonder Woman's creation, and why it is crucial that she continue to spread her message of loving equality today—not to one gender, but to all.

This leads to another important issue—that *Wonder Woman* has, to this point, been addressing concepts that affect only men and women specifically. As society learns more about and grapples with the evolving knowledge that gender and sexuality are a spectrum—that they are not so binary as simply male and female, or heterosexual and

³³ See “Why Men Sexually Harass Women”: <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/10/why-do-more-men-women-sexually-harass/572221/>

³⁴ See “Gillette ad takes on ‘toxic masculinity’ in #MeToo-era rebrand, provoking a backlash”: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/01/15/gillette-takes-toxic-masculinity-new-ad-rebranding-metoo-era-inviting-backlash>

homosexual—*Wonder Woman* must rise to meet this evolution in our understanding. One of *Wonder Woman*'s more recent writers, Greg Rucka, demonstrates a way for our titular heroine to strive toward meaningful change in the acceptance of gender and sexuality as a spectrum. Rucka—who attempts to reconcile the more negative effects of *The New 52* in his *Rebirth* run—is staunch in his belief that Diana is bisexual, saying: “If you don’t accept that, then you don’t understand the character” (qtd. in Narcisse). In his issues post-*New 52*, Rucka depicts Diana in relationships with several Amazons before she leaves the island, as well as a relationship with Steve Trevor. A queer relationship is also represented between Etta Candy and Barbara Minerva—both of whom were heterosexual characters pre-*New 52*. A romance between Queen Hippolyta and Philippus—hinted at in subtext by Pérez and other writers—is plainly visible here. Not only by virtue of the fact that the Amazons are the only ones on the island and thus must live and express love and have relationships with each other, for Wonder Woman to hail from an idyllic social paradise isolated within itself means she must accept all people on the island as they are—a valuable lesson that can be applied to our world. Rucka understands that Themyscira cannot by its nature exist as a heteronormative culture and thus should not look like one; such a utopia might further be updated with more gender fluid characters as the book progresses. Whether subsequent writers will carry this thread through *Wonder Woman*'s future remains to be seen.

In *Wonder Woman*, Marston created a character who defies patriarchy in her very name. As seen widely in her comic, and even in the *Wonder Woman* film, she is known to proclaim: *I am Diana of Themyscira, daughter of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons*. In this lone statement there is inherent power—her identity is Diana; she comes from a

female utopia; she is the daughter of a queen and queen alone. A character who carries no male surname is something a majority of women in society cannot emulate, as even our very names are not our own, bequeathed to us from a long patriarchal lineage. Diana carries no such patriarchal baggage, and Marston wrote her this way with good cause, as her femininity *is* her identity and her power—it is the beginning and the end of what we need know.

Is Marston’s vision of a matriarchy coming?³⁵ Some may think so, but see it as a future to be feared and resented, not celebrated or embraced. During the 2018 Golden Globe Awards, as women took the spotlight and the #TimesUp movement forged ahead under the public eye, former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon said “The time has come. Women are gonna take charge of society. And they couldn’t juxtapose a better villain than Trump. He is the patriarch. This is a definitional moment in the culture [...] The anti-patriarchy movement is going to undo 10,000 years of recorded history” (qtd. in Stefansky). In this period of political regression, where law and policy clash against a sense of urgency for social justice, and patriarchy is more and more a stale and unsuitable concept, the idea of a matriarchy might be discussed as an alternative. That Bannon sees it as a threat is telling, and further emphasizes the gravity of the task ahead for Wonder Woman—she must continue to impart a message of equality, not one-gender dominance, upon the world. Let us look to her example for progress, hope, and love for all ... as we have for some seventy-five years.

³⁵ It already exists in some parts of the world; see CNN’s piece on the Umoja Village in Kenya: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/30/africa/samburu-umoja-village-intl-asequals-africa/index.html>

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