

Amazons in America: Wonder and Feminism, 1941-1973

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By the late 1960s, Wonder Woman had entirely lost her powers. DC Comics decided to update Wonder Woman comics, retooling her so that she would appear more hip, and in doing so completely abandon her roots. Created in the early 1940s as an Amazon princess, Wonder Woman was, to quote an early issue, imbued with “the beauty of Aphrodite, the wisdom of Athena, the strength of Hercules and the speed of Mercury.”¹ DC felt it was necessary to change Wonder Woman and had her break from her Greek mythological origins in the 1960s. Exchanging her star-spangled costume for trendier clothes, Wonder Woman went mod, leaving behind her Amazonian sisters and her divinely imparted powers. She moved permanently into the world of men not as Wonder Woman but as her alter ego, Diana Prince, continuing to fight crime, now with martial arts techniques learned from her Chinese mystic mentor, I Ching. This abandonment of Wonder Woman’s heritage was tied to a continuing process of weakening the underlying feminist themes that had been present since her creation. Although she was part of the dominant patriarchal culture, Wonder Woman comics reflect recent work arguing that there was a considerable feminist presence in post-World War Two America. Her feminist themes of female unity and power, and advocacy of strong, independent women, made Wonder Woman a symbolic female hero, and an inspiration for the so-called “second wave” feminist movement.

This recent work challenges traditional interpretations of post-war America that views the 1950s and 1960s in a stereotypical binary in terms of

¹ Charles Moulton, “Introducing Wonder Woman,” *Sensation Comics* 3, in William Moulton Marston, *Wonder Woman Archives Volume I* (New York: DC Comics, 1998), 46.

women and feminism, where the 1950s are seen as conservative and the 1960s are seen as radical. Women of the 1950s are regularly thought of as submissive housewives, stay at home mothers whose lives were joyfully dedicated to keeping a neat and ordered home for their husbands. This image was particularly embodied in the television programs of the time, such as *The Donna Reed Show* and *Leave It To Beaver*. These women are typically seen as the opposites of the radical “women’s libbers” of the late 1960s, who vocally opposed the homemaker ideal of the 1950s. This image of the happy housewife was challenged before the women’s liberation movement began, in works like Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*. Released in 1963, Friedan showed that not all women were pleased with their role in post-war America and that many felt it was repressive.² Second wave feminists, emerging in the late 1960s, carried on this theme, advocating economic and political equality as they re-examined their homemaker roles and entered the workforce.³ Historians in the 1970s and early 1980s looked back at the 1950s and their “studies of postwar culture found that government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate their interests to those of returning male veterans.”⁴ Until the 1980s, scholarship generally maintained the stereotypes of the 1950s as a conservative, albeit repressive, time for women. The 1960s was viewed as radical and emerging out of the tumultuous atmosphere of that decade. However, the mid-1980s saw a re-examination of the 1950s, epitomized in a phrase from Eugenia Kaledin’s *Mothers and More*, a book that argued against “the dominant myth of [women’s] victimization.”⁵ Over the past twenty years, this revisionist scholarship argues that many women in the 1950s participated in movements and were involved in lifestyles contrary to the ideals of the dominant culture, and that “second-wave” feminism was not simply a result of a turbulent decade but grew from these early feminist women.

² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963)

³ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 5.

⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, Ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 3.

⁵ Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), xiii.

This re-examination of the 1950s can be divided into two categories: social movements and counter-cultural lifestyles. Women of the 1950s participated in activities such as union activism, the civil rights movement, and the fight for sexual freedom and birth control. Susan Rimby Leighow demonstrates how married women who worked as nurses in the 1950s fought for better working conditions, winning “not only part-time scheduling and higher pay rates but also concessions such as maternity leave and on-site child-care.”⁶ Working-class women in industry were actively involved in unions, carrying on advances made during the Second World War into the post-war era and gaining key concessions and benefits from employers that helped women continually move ahead over this decade.⁷ Feminist historians like Ruth Feldstein, Dee Garrison and Margaret Rose have examined the role of women in the civil rights movement, where women of all races were actively involved in public protests from New York to California, fighting for equal rights and civil liberties for African-Americans, but also in California, for Mexican-Americans.⁸ Also, the struggle for sexual freedom was fought throughout the 1950s, with women such as Margaret Sanger and Katherine Dexter McCormick continuing to work tirelessly to market a birth control pill that would be available for all women.⁹ These are just some of the many ways revisionist historians have discovered women were involved in social movements of the 1950s, and it shows a rich heritage for the broader feminist movement that would emerge in the 1960s.

Women’s involvement in counter-cultural activities is also a significant feature of this scholarship, and demonstrates that the dominant culture of the 1950s was not monolithic in its power. Some women reacted against the repressive ideals of the dominant culture, not finding fulfillment within the domestic sphere. Others ignored the domestic sphere entirely and engaged in

⁶ Susan Rimby Leighow, “An ‘Obligation to Participate,’” in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 51.

⁷ Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Recapturing Working-Class Feminism,” in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 74.

⁸ Ruth Feldstein, “I Wanted The Whole World To See”; Dee Garrison, “Our Skirts Gave Them Courage”; Margaret Rose, “Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican Barrios in California”; in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*.

⁹ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Random House, 1993), 282-288.

other lifestyles. Donna Penn explores the participation of women in the lesbian subculture and the reaction of authorities to this lifestyle, who saw lesbians as deviant and attempted to associated them with prostitutes in the minds of the American public.¹⁰ Despite the attempts by authorities to curtail these activities, the lesbian subculture was a strong one in post-war America. Brett Harvey's oral history of women in the 1950s shows that many women had lesbian inclinations they acted on, despite harsh repression.¹¹ Women differed from cultural norms in other ways as well, performing illegal abortions before *Roe v. Wade*, and raising children as single parents.¹² Outside of sexuality, Wini Breines writes about the involvement of women in Beat culture, arguing that these young women "latched on to signs of otherness in music and subcultures, in effect rehearsing lives they hoped would be different from their mothers" and stating that "their explorations were the opening salvos in what came to be known as the women's movement."¹³ This revisionist feminism shows that the 1950s was not simply an era of repressed housewives, but of women acting outside of cultural ideals in various forms. "Second wave" feminism was thus not a spontaneous movement stemming from the events of the 1960s as the actions of these women in the 1950s inspired and laid the groundwork for their feminist successors.

Arguably the most significant aspect of post-war America was the Cold War and its ramifications are personified by Joseph McCarthy, whose HUAC Senate Committee actively sought out communists during the years 1950-1954. McCarthyism became associated with the culture of fear that pervaded America as McCarthy's search for communists affected society by encouraging cultural homogeneity.¹⁴ Because of this threat of communism, many things seen as abnormal were viewed with fear and anxiety, labeled deviant, and suppressed. Thus were American citizens compelled to be proper and upright citizens and to not engage in any activity that could be interpreted in any way as problematic.

¹⁰ Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman", in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 376.

¹¹ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 175-199.

¹² Rickie Solinger, "Extreme Danger", in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 335-336.

¹³ Wini Breines, "The 'Other' Fifties", in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 402.

¹⁴ David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1978), 21.

This anxiety was reflected in the culture, print, film and radio, which largely espoused the dominant beliefs of the time, often not because of any patriotic desire but out of fear that putting out anything questionable would result in accusations of communism, much like those that plagued the film industry.¹⁵ McCarthy and HUAC were shut down in 1954, but the fear he created pervaded America for years afterwards, in part through cultural reinforcement. This repressive atmosphere makes the actions of 1950s women in terms of social movements and subcultures even more significant, and provides a key reason for the continual lessening of the underlying feminist themes in Wonder Woman comics.

Post-war America also saw the rise of mass culture, as the mass-produced, wide circulation of various media created the opportunity for standardization across these fields. The wartime economic boom carried on into the 1950s, creating disposable income for many Americans who could buy books and magazines, radios and eventually televisions, and go to movies. For decades, the same films, books and magazines had been available across the nation. National broadcasting organizations, such as NBC, ABC and CBS had aired programs nationwide for years and they made the transition into television as the 1950s began, transmitting uniform programming across the map.¹⁶ These national forms of culture reached millions of Americans throughout the nation with the same messages. Many historians have examined mass culture, and this work gives considerable insight into the mindset of Americans.¹⁷ For the post-war period, these examinations are especially apt in terms of youth culture. James Gilbert argues that “parents could no longer impress their value systems on children who were influenced as much by a new peer culture spread by comic books, radio, movies, and television, as by their elders.”¹⁸ Mass culture had significant influence on the citizenry, particularly the youth, and the mass

¹⁵ Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared!* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 90-107.

¹⁶ Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 188-194.

¹⁷ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (New York: Dell, 1972).

¹⁸ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

dissemination of comic books makes them a good source with which to analyze the post-war era.

The Cold War culture of fear and the influence of mass culture converged in the juvenile delinquency crisis of the mid-1950s. McCarthyist anxiety was arguably strongest in terms of its effects upon the impressionable youth of America, who had to be protected from any deviant influence to ensure they became patriotic and democratic Americans. In 1954, Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist who worked at youth mental hygiene clinics in New York, published *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he claimed that the violent stories and images in crime and horror comic books were a contributing factor in juvenile delinquency.¹⁹ Soon after its publication, Democratic Senator Estes Kefauver held senate hearings to investigate juvenile delinquency in America, calling Dr. Wertham as an expert witness to discuss the fiendish influence of comic books.²⁰ To avoid a replay of McCarthy's detrimental investigation of the film industry, the comic industry acted quickly, voluntarily introducing a stringent code to be enforced by the Comic Code Authority.²¹ The comic industry was unlike other entertainment industries of the period, as the power was held entirely at the top and writers and artists were merely wageworkers, allowing for substantial and sudden changes in creative direction. The Comic Code dramatically changed comic books as a whole. The majority of crime and horror books were cancelled, superhero books lost any gritty, *noirish* elements they had and began the descent into camp. Many companies went bankrupt as public outcry and severe rules forced the cancellation of significant portions of their lines.²² The industry's immediate self-censorship dramatically demonstrates the levels at which anything seen as deviant, and thus potentially harmful, was suppressed in post-war America. The inherent opposition to the Cold War focus on social and cultural order exemplified by the juvenile delinquency crisis

¹⁹ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart & Company, 1954).

²⁰ U.S. Senate, *Committee to Study Juvenile Delinquency* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1955).

²¹ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 110-111.

²² Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 181-182.

and proto-feminist activism is personified, albeit fictionally, in Wonder Woman and her comic books.

Wonder Woman first appeared in *All Star Comics* #8, released in December 1941, in a backup story written by Charles Moulton, the pen name of psychologist William Moulton Marston, and illustrated by Harry G. Peter. Wonder Woman was Diana, an Amazonian princess who lived on Paradise Island, an all-female utopia ruled by Queen Hippolyte and divinely hidden from the rest of the world by the Greek gods. The story began with an American warplane crashing on the island. Diana and her fellow Amazons rescued and cared for the unconscious pilot, Captain Steve Trevor, but by Amazonian law the man could not stay on the island. The goddesses Aphrodite and Athena informed Hippolyte that war was brewing in man's world and that Trevor must be returned there to fight, sent with an Amazon who would use her powers to fight evil. Diana, who was in love with Trevor, won the tournament to decide which Amazon would leave Paradise Island and took Trevor back to America.²³ She created the alter ego of Diana Prince, an army nurse, and protected Trevor and America as Wonder Woman. The character was a huge success and soon appeared in three monthly books, each of which sold well over a million copies every month, often outselling *Superman* and *Batman*.²⁴

Appearing just as the United States entered the Second World War, Wonder Woman became part of the war effort within and through her comics. Athena tells Hippolyte an Amazon must be sent back to America: "American liberty and freedom must be preserved, [...] for America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women, needs your help!"²⁵ Wonder Woman fought Nazi operatives acting within America such as Dr. Poison, a Nazi super villain who tried to poison American troops,²⁶ and Baroness Paula von Gunther, a Gestapo agent who captured and hypnotized American women to make them support the Nazi cause.²⁷ As Diana Prince, Wonder Woman worked first as an Army nurse and then as an Air Force secretary, helping the armed forces with

²³ *All Star Comics* 8, in Marston, *Wonder Woman Archives*, 8-16.

²⁴ Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 211.

²⁵ *All Star Comics* 8, in Marston, *Archives*, 15.

²⁶ *Sensation Comics* 2, in Marston, *Archives*, 31-44.

²⁷ *Sensation Comics* 4, in Marston, *Archives*, 59-72.

her day job as well as participating in local espionage missions for her boss.²⁸ Furthermore, starting with *Sensation Comics #2*, nearly every issue of Wonder Woman's adventures ended with a graphic that stated: "For Victory: Buy United States War Bonds and Stamps."²⁹ Wonder Woman served as an example of proper wartime behavior during a period when the government actively encouraged women to participate in the war effort through propaganda. She was a sort of super-powered Rosie the Riveter, with her comics demonstrating to girls and women the importance of contributing to the war effort. Wonder Woman comics were part of the dominant culture, and from her very creation she reflected the government propaganda of the time, exemplifying an ideal of patriotism for women.

However, beyond the propaganda there were underlying feminist themes instilled in the character by her creator. William Moulton Marston had feminist leanings, and these beliefs were reflected within his comic books. Marston thought that men, with their proclivity towards power and violence, were destroying society and that the patriarchy should be replaced by the rule of strong and independent women. In an interview with *Family Circle*, he stated: "The one outstanding benefit to humanity from the First World War was the great increase in the strength of women - physical, economic, mental. [...] They discovered that they were potentially as strong as men - in some ways stronger".³⁰ In a letter to a colleague, Marston wrote that he saw Wonder Woman as "psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world."³¹ He saw this rule as one of permanent peace, saying: "When women rule, there won't be any more [war] because the girls won't want to waste time killing men."³² To Marston, women were strong, rational and powerful, and he had many theories about how men should submit to the "loving authority" of women. His own beliefs are very similar to what would

²⁸ *Wonder Woman 1*, in Marston, *Archives*, 172.

²⁹ *Sensation Comics 10*, in Marston, *Archives*, 198-211.

³⁰ Olive Richard, "Our Women are our Future," *Family Circle* (14 August 1942) <<http://www.wonderwoman-online.com/articles/fc-marston.html>>.

³¹ Charles Lyons, "Suffering Sappho! A Look at the Creator and Creation of Wonder Woman," *Comic Book Resources* (23 August 2006) <<http://www.comicbookresources.com/news/newsitem.cgi?id=8197>>.

³² Richard, "Our Women," <<http://www.wonderwoman-online.com/articles/fc-marston.html>>.

become known as maternal feminism, or simply maternalism, which emphasizes the differences between the sexes and “embrace[s] and essentialist view that women are naturally more peaceful and less militarist than men.”³³ Marston saw women as far better suited to lead, based both on their ability to be as strong and capable as men and their inherent maternal qualities that would allow them to lead with his “loving authority.” He believed in equality and difference, and both were central to his theories. These progressive attitudes about women underlie his comics, and it is clear that Wonder Woman was the embodiment of his feminist leanings and his belief in the power of strong and independent women.

Marston’s feminist values manifested themselves in the comics in several different ways. First, the character herself was inherently progressive, created as an equal to the male superheroes of the time. While there were other female superheroes who came before Wonder Woman, they were vastly out-numbered by the male superheroes of the time. Wonder Woman’s powers rivaled those of the original superhero, Superman, and she was the opposite of the stereotypical damsel in distress, regularly rescuing Steve Trevor from nefarious villains. The stories also reflected Marston’s feminist beliefs, as well as the early feminist activism described in revisionist feminism historiography. Wonder Woman rarely looked to men for help when fighting villains, instead relying on her Amazon sisters or her American friends for assistance. When she needed a distraction so she could save Trevor, rather than getting the army to help, Wonder Woman went straight to Holliday College for Women, enlisting the marching band to help her.³⁴ These girls, led by Etta Candy, became a permanent feature of Wonder Woman comics, helping her in nearly every issue. Although she fought regular villains, Wonder Woman fought for social issues as well, confronting a businessman who was marking up milk prices drastically³⁵ and a store manager who underpaid and overworked his employees.³⁶ In both these situations, Wonder Woman was motivated by talking to working-class women who told her of their plight. These examples of social activism, female

³³ Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 330-331.

³⁴ *Sensation Comics 2*, in Marston, *Archives*, 40.

³⁵ *Sensation Comics 7*, in Marston, *Archives*, 101-114.

³⁶ *Sensation Comics 8*, in Marston, *Archives*, 115-128.

unity and support, and both equality and difference with males show that Marston's feminist ideas were echoed in his comics.

There is, however, a major problem with Marston's supposedly feminist comic book. Marston was extremely fond of placing his female characters in bondage situations, whereby a character would not only be bound in a variety of ways but dominated by whoever had her ensnared. An infamous story, "Villainy, Incorporated", "published in 1948, and apparently completed just before Marston's death, contained no fewer than seventy-five bondage panels."³⁷ For Wonder Woman, this bondage took two key forms. First, it placed her in a submissive role towards the villain, usually male, who had her bound. However, this was not just in terms of being tied up and unable to escape, as chaining Wonder Woman's bracelets together made her lose all her powers. The bracelets were a reminder of Hercules' imprisonment of the Amazons during his mythical twelve labours, and the first time Wonder Woman's bracelets and chained together a vision of her mother appears saying: "Daughter, if any man welds chains on your bracelets, you will become weak as we Amazons were when we surrendered to Hercules."³⁸ By depriving her of her strength, bondage gave men power over Wonder Woman and allowed them to control her. Secondly, bondage was also depicted in a positive light. Visiting her home in *Sensation Comics #6*, Wonder Woman engaged in games with her Amazon sisters involving lassoing and trying up each other,³⁹ and in a later issue stated: "On Paradise Island [...] we play many binding games", demonstrating "the safest method of tying a girl's arms."⁴⁰ In *Sensation Comics #40*, Wonder Woman gleefully allowed some of her female friends to tie her to a post, telling them to "bind me as tight as you can, girls, with the biggest ropes and chains you can find!"⁴¹ Being bound was clearly enjoyable for Wonder Woman, and her Amazon sisters, and took on an erotic quality in their depiction. The prevalence of bondage is very problematic, as it both objectifies and sexualizes Wonder Woman in a

³⁷ Les Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 61.

³⁸ *Sensation Comics 4*, in Marston, *Archives*, 69.

³⁹ *Sensation Comics 6*, in Marston, *Archives*, 87-100.

⁴⁰ SuperDickery, *Suffering Sappho!*, 2006.

<<http://www.superdickery.com/bondage/3.html>>.

⁴¹ William Moulton Marston, *Sensation Comics 40* (New York: DC Comics, April 1945).

submissive role, where the men who bound her are in power. This becomes even more of an obstacle to the feminist argument when Marston's own comments are considered.

William Moulton Marston, though arguably progressive in terms of his theories of female rule, had a very unorthodox approach to bondage and submission. He explicitly confirmed the erotic element many older readers saw in his Wonder Woman comics, stating: "Giving to others, being controlled by them, submitting to other people cannot possibly be enjoyable without a strong erotic element."⁴² He further says: "I have developed elaborate ways of having Wonder Woman and other characters confined... confinement to [Wonder Woman] and the Amazons is just a sporting game, an actual enjoyment of being subdued."⁴³ To Marston, bondage and submission was tied to his ideas of female rule, as "only when the control of self by others is more pleasant than the unbound assertion of self in human relationships can we hope for a stable, peaceful human society."⁴⁴ He believed that submitting to others, demonstrated in his Wonder Woman comics through bondage, was the only way to achieve peace. Marston's own theories suggest that men should be submitting as much as women, especially in terms of his ideas of female rule, but in his comics, women are bound disproportionately more so than men. It is primarily his thoughts on the erotic elements of submission and women's enjoyment thereof that are clearly demonstrated in his comics; the other element of the argument, of males submitting to females, is largely neglected. While Marston's own theories have some early feminist leanings, the execution of them in the comics calls into questions the underlying feminist themes of Wonder Woman. By focusing on the sexual aspects, and weakening Wonder Woman through bondage, Marston undermines his own point, objectifying and sexualizing his creation instead of showing the supposed larger benefits of submission to others. What comes across is fetishism as the pervasive bondage only serves to weaken Wonder Woman and place her under the power of men. Nonetheless, the implications of this constant bondage were likely lost on his target audience of children, who bought the adventures of the strong, female character in droves.

⁴² Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 210.

⁴³ CastleKeys, *Wonder Woman*, <<http://www.castlekeys.com/Pages/wonder.html>>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Though Marston died in 1947, subsequent writers stayed relatively faithful to his vision and style and Wonder Woman continued her duality of being part of the dominant culture and its beliefs and espousing underlying feminism. When the juvenile delinquency crisis hit Wonder Woman was not spared from the changes. While Wertham focused primarily on crime and horror comics, he levied a brief and fierce attack against Wonder Woman, saying, “for girls she is a morbid ideal.”⁴⁵ He found fault with many of the characteristics of Wonder Woman discussed above, such as her strength and independence, and her association with the Holliday girls. Quoting *Psychiatric Quarterly*, Wertham wrote that Wonder Woman “portrays [an] extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is plainly Lesbian.”⁴⁶ To Wertham, Wonder Woman was the exact opposite of what a woman should be. He labeled her strength as morbid, her independence from men as sadistic, and her association with women as lesbianism.⁴⁷ Wertham’s associations were strong ones in Cold War America, and the collective, self-censoring response of the comic community to *Seduction of the Innocent* and the Kefauver hearings affected Wonder Woman significantly.

Since her creation, Wonder Woman comics had maintained a binary of being part of the dominant, patriarchal culture while simultaneously containing feminist themes. This binary ended as the comic industry responded to Wertham, and Wonder Woman became entirely subsumed by the dominant culture, losing her feminist leanings over the next decade. The initial changes were small but influential. All of DC Comics superhero books became more fantastic, moving from normal crimes and super villains to time travel and alien encounters as science fiction merged with superheroics and the books descended into campy adventure stories.⁴⁸ Beyond the stories, Wonder Woman’s character changed and she became less of an Amazon warrior and more of a stereotypical 1950s woman, in fact putting a great deal of energy into trying to get Steve Trevor to marry her. Her origins were changed so that her powers were no longer the product of her highly trained Amazon body and mind but rather

⁴⁵ Wertham, *Seduction*, 193.

⁴⁶ Wertham, *Seduction*, 193.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ T.L. Canote, “Wonder Woman,” *JSA Member Profiles*, 1999.

simply a gift from the Greek gods, a gift that could be taken away and which was not innate to her character.⁴⁹ She became increasingly separated from her origins until, in *Wonder Woman* #178, released in October 1968, Wonder Woman completely abandoned her Amazon roots and went mod.⁵⁰ She opened a fashion boutique, started training under a male Chinese martial arts master, and fought crime as a regular, powerless human being. Over the past decade, Wonder Woman's feminist roots had been weakened but she nonetheless had maintained a key link to Marston's vision of female rule: the utopian Paradise Island and her Amazon sisters. Without this, Wonder Woman lost the last thread of the underlying feminism instilled in her by her creator and became entirely fused with the dominant culture.

It was at this point that Wonder Woman's connection to feminism became clear. The proto-feminist social movements identified by revisionist historians had evolved into the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s. One of the most prominent women in this movement was Gloria Steinem, who, along with many other feminists, was not pleased by this drastic shift in Wonder Woman.⁵¹ These women actively campaigned for Wonder Woman to return to her Amazon roots, arguing that by changing Wonder Woman's character DC Comics had stripped Wonder Woman of her strength. Their campaign succeeded, and as Wonder Woman was about to be restored, Gloria Steinem launched *Ms. Magazine*, a publication dedicated to women and feminist issues. The cover of the first issue was emblazoned with a picture of Wonder Woman in her full Amazon regalia and the headline: "Wonder Woman for President." Inside the magazine was an article celebrating her restoration, including a reprint of Marston's original origin story from *All Star Comics* #8. Joanne Edgar, a *Ms. Magazine* co-editor, succinctly captured Wonder Woman's plight: "Wonder Woman had feminist beginnings, but like many of us, she went into a decline in the 'fifties."⁵² The vocal response of the women's liberation movement clearly shows that Wonder Woman comics had influenced the generation that followed her creation. Despite being part of the dominant patriarchal culture, Wonder

⁴⁹ *Wonder Woman* 105 (New York: DC Comics, April 1959).

⁵⁰ *Wonder Woman* 178 (New York: DC Comics, October 1968).

⁵¹ Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years*, 156.

⁵² Joanne Edgar, "Wonder Woman Revisited," *Ms. Magazine* 1:1 (1972), 52.

Wonder Woman had become a heroic symbol for these women, representing female strength and independence in the midst of a male dominated industry.

Wonder Woman's connection to revisionist feminism is not a direct parallel, but they share certain themes and ultimately their influence results in the same outcome. These early feminist movements had been largely ignored by the dominant culture of post-war America, operating quietly, almost secretly, while women were portrayed as subservient, happy homemakers. Wonder Woman's underlying feminist beliefs had been largely ignored as well because Wonder Woman, as part of the culture, helped to reinforce these dominant beliefs from the Second World War until the late 1960s. Her feminist inclinations could also be said to be subtle, existing as a concealed theme within her comics, often overshadowed by the other aspects of the book. Where social activism slowly grew from World War Two onward, Wonder Woman diminished from this period on. By the time these movements had evolved into the broader women's liberation movement, Wonder Woman had lost all her feminist elements. Nonetheless, both forms of feminism had existed outside of the social order of post-war America with these early movements being quiet, hidden and suppressed if found out. Also, Wonder Woman's underlying feminist themes were called out and suppressed by the juvenile delinquency crisis. While written by William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman comics reflected his early maternal feminist beliefs and espoused his support of strong, independent women, female unity, and women's equality with, and difference from, men. Though there were problems in terms of Marston's regular use of bondage in a fetishist manner, what emerged from his comics is a powerful female superhero, the equal of any male superhero, who, because of the benefits of being raised in a female utopia, was able to defend America and help create world peace. Ultimately, the most significant connection between Wonder Woman comics and early feminism emerges from the women's liberation movement. This movement, which modern scholars argue 1950s feminism laid the groundwork for, identified itself with Wonder Woman, rallying to her defense when DC stripped her of her heritage and strength, thus connecting the two. Much like the women's liberation movement looked back at Wonder Woman as a female hero, it owed its existence to the real female heroes who had come before it and paved the way for its broader, public movement.