

WEIGHING IN ON WONDER WOMAN: ANALYZING
GARDNER FOX'S WRITING FOR
POTENTIAL SEXISM

by

JENNIFER DEROSS

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Student: Jennifer DeRoss

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of English by:

Elizabeth Wheeler	Chairperson
Heidi Kaufman	Member
Andréa Gilroy	Member

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School
----------------	-----------------------------

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Jennifer DeRoss

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Wonder Woman is seen as the embodiment of feminism in the comic world and her placement as the secretary of the Justice Society of America is seen as a crime against her character. Many blame Gardner Fox for this decision, but I argue that accusing him of sexism is an oversimplification. My work seeks to fill in the lack of knowledge regarding his writing of Wonder Woman and restore his name. While scholars are right to be attentive to the use of demeaning stereotypes that have long been used to keep women from access to power, the way in which Gardner Fox wrote Wonder Woman, conveys a sense of respect for women and their contributions to society in general; therefore, assertions that he is a sexist are not only misleading but inappropriately degrading the work of a man who was trying to accurately represent the women he saw around him.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Jennifer DeRoss

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Lane Community College, Eugene

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, English, 2017, University of Oregon
Bachelors of Arts, 2015, English/Comic Studies, University of Oregon

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Comic Studies
Archive Studies
Biography Studies
Queer Studies

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

GE Writing Instructor, University of Oregon, 2016-2017
GE Writing Tutor, University of Oregon, 2015-2016
Instructional Support Specialist, Lane Community College, 2008-2015

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Sherwood Travel Award, Not Gay Enough So You'd Notice: Fuffy from a
Deconstructive Point of View, University of Oregon, 2017

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I dedicate this and all my work to my two sons: Jacob and Cannon

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. WEIGHING IN ON WONDER WOMAN: ANALYZING GARDNER FOX'S WRITING FOR POTENTIAL SEXISM.....	10
APPENDIX: COMIC PAGES REFERENCED.....	28
REFERENCES CITED.....	29

CHAPTER I

WEIGHING IN ON WONDER WOMAN: ANALYZING GARDNER FOX'S

WRITING FOR POTENTIAL SEXISM

The Hawkman story in *Flash Comics* #20 (1941), opens with Carter Hall and Shiera Sanders listening to a radio story where they hear about a man who can control a bomb from a distance. After Sanders leaves, Hall dons his Hawkman costume. If this was the first Hawkman comic one picked up, one would assume from this set-up that Sanders was a romantic character whose only purpose is to be rescued like many women in superhero comics from the Golden Age.¹ Instead, Sanders gets a meanwhile. At the same time as Hawkman is dodging bombs, Sanders looks out the window and sees that the bomber is right across from her home. In an attempt to have a laugh on “Mister Carter ‘Hawkman’ Hall” she proceeds to use a lariat to swing over the “crowded street below,” climb into the apartment through a balcony window, and hold the bomber at gunpoint! (200) (See figure One) This is not only a heroic act, it shows the reader that she knows who he is and highlights the competitive nature of their relationship. Unfortunately, she is quickly immobilized and Hawkman saves her just in time. This rapid shift feels quite illogical after such heroics. That said, reading Hawkman serially reveals that this kind of pattern of rescue is frequently replicated by both her and Hawkman himself as well with Sanders coming in to save him instead. This points to a sense of equality and an emphasis on the fact that they depend on each other. It should be no surprise that she later becomes Hawkgirl, a superhero in her own

¹While women in superhero comics are often used to set up plot points for the male hero and title character, there are a fair amount more female heroes in the Golden Age than some might think. Among the most notable are The Woman in Red, Miss Fury, Fantomah, and Sheena of the Jungle. Still, few titles contained multiple female characters and female-led issues often had back-up characters that were mostly made up of men keeping the gender balance weighted heavily on the masculine side. The Golden Age is generally accepted to have run from between the last part of the Great Depression to the end of America’s involvement in World War II, or the late 1930s to the late 1940s.

right. When making a “strong” female character, many will do so by writing a female with masculine attributes because we culturally read feminine attributes as inherently negative. This is not the case for writer and co-creator, Gardner Fox, whose female characters consistently stand out from these simple amalgamations. This point is evident in the very first panel where we see Sanders in her loungewear looking out the window with a fashion magazine sitting by her side. Here, Fox suggests that she may go off to show up “the hawk” in a masculine manner, but she remains a woman who reads women’s magazines and cares about her appearance. These little moments make her recognizable and distinct as a woman whose strength emerges through her association with a range of character traits. In this context, it might be shocking to hear that Gardner Fox also wrote for Wonder Woman when she was made the secretary of the *All-Star’s* Justice Society of America and she often gets sidelined from the action.

Wonder Woman is seen as the embodiment of feminism in the superhero comic world and many people still count placing her as the secretary of the Justice Society of America as one of the biggest crimes against her character and the most sexist moment in comic book history. Some, like Jill Lepore, blame Fox for this decision and it is seen by those people as the biggest blemish on his career. I argue that, while he did write the stories where she was a secretary, to judge or dismiss Fox as merely playing into female stereotypes limits our understanding of his writing as a whole and indeed much of early DC as his writing was seminal to the building of the company. There are many factors that led to the decision to make Wonder Woman the secretary of the Justice Society of America (JSA). In fact, the final decision would have been made by Sheldon Mayer, the editor of both the Wonder Woman and JSA titles. It is also important to note that William Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, was very particular about his character and

he did not want anybody writing her. In order to refute this accusation of sexism and open his writing to further interpretation, the following discussion illuminates relevant biographical information about Gardner Fox to explore how the women in his life may have impacted his writing. I also explain why William Marston created Wonder Woman, also in 1941, with an emphasis on why she is seen as such a feminist character. I then transition to an analysis of Gardner Fox's first attempt at writing for Wonder Woman as a part of the JSA in 1942. From there, I close read Gardner Fox's unpublished script for a Wonder Woman solo adventure along with the Marston's rewrites to show how the two men presented different perspectives regarding the status of women. After this, I explore Fox's writing of Wonder Woman as the secretary of the JSA and address the cultural bias inherent in this job and how it exemplifies a devaluing of women's work. While scholars are right to be attentive to the use of demeaning stereotypes that have long been used to keep women from access to power, the way in which Gardner Fox wrote Wonder Woman, as well as other female characters, conveys a sense of respect for women and their contributions to society in general; therefore, assertions that he is a sexist are not only misleading but inappropriately degrading the work of a man who was trying to accurately represent the women he saw around him.

This story starts when Gardner Francis Fox was born the 20th of May 1911 in Brooklyn New York. Despite the economic issues at the time, he grew up in what would be considered a comfortable home. Even at a young age, he was always reading and he later wrote for both his high school and college newspapers. He went on to earn both a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Laws before being admitted to the New York Bar in 1936. He had been working as a lawyer for two years when Vincent Sullivan, a friend from grammar school and editor for *National Al-*

lied Publications, asked Fox to write for him because he knew Fox would enjoy it. After about two years of writing comics at night to supplement his income during the Great Depression, Maxwell Charles Gaines started *Flash Comics* and asked Fox to write both of its headlining heroes: The Flash and Hawkman. At this point, Fox gave up practicing law because he found he could no longer maintain both jobs. Most people remark that one should write what one knows, and this seems to be one of the ideas Fox took to heart. Before his writing of Wonder Woman, Fox had a hand in creating four of the major characters: Doctor Fate, The Flash, Sandman, and Hawkman - are all high class intelligent people with reputable jobs and stable relationships. The most striking of these relationships is the previously mentioned Hawkman and Hawkgirl. Indeed, their connection is one of the first things we learn about Golden Age Hawkman's mythology. Carter Hall is not just a superhero, but a reincarnated Egyptian Prince, Shiera Sanders is his reincarnated wife. Similar to their patterns of rescue, he often berates her near the end of the early comics, either directing these comments to her or thinking it to himself, such as in *Flash Comics* #2 (1940) where he exclaims, "You said you wouldn't mix in trouble again— if we got married!" to which she responds, "We're engaged, darling — but not married yet!" (24). Here, there is undeniably a bit of sexism at play as he attempts to control his partner, but this could also be seen as playful banter. This can be seen again when he takes a souvenir home for his collection at the end of the issue and she retorts, "You would!" (33).² The fact that Gardner Fox paired up his early characters like this could be because he was married the same year he started writing comics.

² Greg Fox asserts that Lynda J. Negrini, Gardner Fox's wife, is responsible for the fact that the University of Oregon has the Gardner Fox Collection as she "more than likely wanted them out of the house." She was a very society conscious woman and saw her family as "high class Italian" Consequently, she kept an immaculate house. This runs in direct opposition to Gardner Fox's drive to collect. As his wife would do the finished type work and revisions for him, according to Bob Kar, this makes the retort work on two levels. Not only does this show a sense of familiarity between the two characters in the story, it could also be a self deprecating joke shared with his wife.

His relationship with his wife further set him apart from most of the other comic book writers at the time who were mostly unmarried and lacked a college education. He also had a very close relationship with his sister Kay Fox who never married, but made a large impact on her community. The largest of these was through her role as head of the Keene Public Library for twenty-nine years. Intentional or not, she lived her life in a manner that fell in line with the aims of the second wave of feminism with its emphasis on finding fulfillment through building a career and Fox's daughter Lynda adored her.³ His life experiences gave him insight that they simply did not have. Arguably, his personal life shaped his professional work, resulting in the creation of complex female characters and a fair amount of female fans.⁴ In a career that spanned decades, Gardner Fox wrote well over 4,000 comic book stories for dozens of different characters and multiple companies including EC, DC, and Marvel. Throughout this time, he helped to balance the gender bias by inserting many female characters into his comics. Fox had a hand in creating both major characters like Moon Girl and Zatanna as well as lesser known female characters like Inza Cramer and Joan Williams. This placed him in a position to be quite capable of writing for a character like Wonder Woman. While Fox was busy establishing himself as a go-to writer in the comic industry, William Marston, was calling that industry into question.

In order to assess Gardner Fox's writing of Wonder Woman, it is first necessary to discuss the way that the creator of Wonder Woman, William Moulton Marston, wanted his character to

³ Gardner Fox's daughter Lynda Fox Cohen, named after her mother, must have seen her aunt as a role model and Kay doted on her niece. Kay Fox even left Lynda her home in Keene where Lynda continued her aunt's work in family genealogy and was active in Keene's Yankee Bottle Club, which her aunt had helped found.

⁴ His most recognizable female fan is Margaret Gemingnani, who was one of the few women actively involved in early fandom. She is known for her highly informative articles and she admired work that didn't talk down to its readers. In The Gardner Fox Collection, I have also found that he was in correspondence with a Mrs. Noreen Parker who would pitch ideas to him about Wonder Woman and there is also a letter from Howard Leroy Davis talking about how The Flash is his four year old daughter's favorite superhero showing that even young girls connected with Fox's characters.

be depicted. Marston saw a problem with way men and woman were portrayed in Golden Age Comics and thought he could do better. In *The Life and Times of the Amazon Princess Wonder Woman: The Complete History*, Les Daniels explains that before creating Wonder Woman, Marston worked as an expert on mental health for many different women's magazines. One of the topics he covered was the effects that comic books had on children. In particular, Marston pointed to what he saw as "blood-curdling masculinity" within the industry (55). This caught the attention of Maxwell Charles Gaines. Fearing an anti-comics backlash, Gaines hired him to serve on an advisory board in a public relations capacity. Along with this offer, he suggested that Marston should come up with a female character of his own. Marston drew from both of the women with whom he lived in a polyamorous relationship in his construction of this new character. Olive Byrne was a primary influence with her bangles that became the bracelets of submission⁵; but there are touches of Elizabeth Marston, too, with her independence and intelligence. In "Wonder Woman: Bondage and Liberation" Ben Saunders delves into Marston's psychological theories and makes the argument that, more than anything else, Wonder Woman is a reflection of those theories. In fact, there are indicators that Marston intended readers of his comics to treat them almost like instruction manuals. Essentially, Saunders breaks down Marston's book *The Emotions of Normal People* (1928) into the idea that most men secretly want to be dominated by women, who are capable of enjoying both a dominant and submissive role with either men or other women. Moreover, because women are capable of taking up this dual positioning, experienced women should become "Love Leaders" teaching others, especially men, how to take pleasure in submission, thereby benefiting all humanity (50). The way in which Marston imagines

⁵ The Bracelets of Submission are indestructible bracers the Amazons wear as a symbol of their past subjugation to Hercules. They are bullet proof and serve a defensive purpose.

domination and submission as both sexual and social forces also helps explain why bondage is such a common motif throughout his writing of Wonder Woman. Saunders claims that it is this supposed inherent female duality that allows Wonder Woman to be understood as a list of seeming contradictions: “For Wonder Woman is a fantasy figure who asserts, against the entire masculinist order, that it is possible to be both beautiful and strong, to be nurturing and independent, to be emotional and intelligent, to be assertive and kind” (70). This duality is a key aspect of the character for Marston and one of the major factors that mark her as a feminist icon.

Gardner Fox got his first chance to write for Wonder Woman when she guest-starred in the Justice Society of America, and he showed himself to be fairly capable of representing the dualities that are so significant to her character.⁶ *All-Star* #11, titled “The Justice Society Joins the War on Japan!” is the very first issue of JSA after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the first issue of JSA to contain Wonder Woman. In her solo adventure, Diana Prince, Wonder Woman’s alter ego, joins the ranks of Army nurses along with Shiera Sanders. Impressively, Fox even writes a whole page where the two women are talking. This page does not pass the Bechdel test⁷ because they spend all the times that we can see talking about Hawkman, but the fact that almost a full page is dedicated to showing two women talking is a pleasant surprise to find in Golden Age comics which had very few female characters interacting with each other outside of issues of Wonder Woman (See Figure Two). The way Gardner Fox wrote each JSA issue included a group introduction and conclusion, as well as giving each active member a short side-mission to

⁶ Although *All-Star* #8 includes Wonder Woman’s debut as a back up feature, there is strong evidence that it was in fact a nine page version of the original and unpublished *Sensation* #1 that was written by Marston not Fox.

⁷ The Bechdel test came from the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel. It is a way of gauging female representations in media. In order to pass the Bechdel test, a work must contain at least two women, these women must talk to each other, and their exchange must be about something other than a man.

shine in. Showing his research on the character, Fox takes the time in this six-page solo adventure to mention she has the twin bracelets and golden lasso given to her by Aphrodite and includes her tagline: “The beauty of Aphrodite, the wisdom of Athena, the speed of Mercury, and the strength of Hercules” in both words and actions (22). The explicit replication of the tag line in the story itself adds to the feeling that Fox is reveling in the extremes of her characterization. Wonder Woman once again makes a sympathetic and caring nurse, but she quickly discovers that the detachment she was sent to serve is out numbered. As a result, she dons her costume and joins in the fight. She quickly not only turns the tables, she gets the whole island under American control. This prompts the detachment she was helping to unanimously make her an honorary member. The mix of gentleness and strength shows that Fox was taking great care in representing the character. Still, this version of Wonder Woman feels just a bit off from the Wonder Woman in Marston’s comics. She is a touch more violent than normal, such as when she is using switches to keep the enemy soldiers in line as she marches them back to camp. Instead of turning them over to the detachment, Marston would have come up with some sort of rehabilitation through patterns of female dominance and taught male submission to prevent them from wanting to step out of line.⁸ Similarly, her lasso is used more frequently and traditionally than in Marston’s versions where he has her mostly capturing enemies to force them into obeying her and telling the truth. Finally, she does not get tied up once! This removes the submission aspects that were a key motif that Marston emphasized. These changes may make the solo mission more or less of a feminist text depending on how much one feels that those elements are a crucial factor. I have found

⁸ This motif of bondage based instruction is common in Wonder Woman. This is most exemplified in Transformation Island which is an Amazonian correctional facility where villains are taught obedience to loving authority thereby giving them the opportunity to leave their villainous ways behind them.

no reaction from Marston to the writing of Wonder Woman for this issue, but by *All-Star* #12, Hawkman informs the JSA that Wonder Woman has volunteered to be the secretary for the duration of the war showing that Marston had already persuaded editor Sheldon Mayer to limit her position in the JSA.

Gardner Fox did get a chance to write a second solo adventure for Wonder Woman in *All-Star* #13 “Shanghaied into Space” and through the unpublished Wonder Woman solo adventure we can see what a Gardner Fox storyline based around teaching gender equality looks like. In “Fandom and Authorship,” Will Brooker explains the definition of author in a comic book context as: “An individual who, whatever his [or her] role in the creative process, contributes a recognizable, personal style” (64). This first version by Gardner Fox adheres with his recognizable authorship, which includes pulp aesthetics, the over use of heavy word balloons, and the insertion of educative factoids.⁹ The published issue, released after Wonder Woman’s solo adventure was rewritten by Marston, starts out with all eight of the JSA members getting gassed by German agents during a meeting. Each member is placed into a spaceship and blasted off to one each of the other planets in our solar system with Wonder Woman being sent to Venus. As he did for all of the other solo adventures, Fox starts by providing information on the planet each hero is sent to. For Venus, he writes things like: “Brighter than anything in the heavens but the sun and the moon, Venus reflects sun-light from the clouds that swathe her” (65). Once on the planet, the setting is once again very Fox in that his pulp influences come through. The planet is described much like the jungle covered Venus from *Carson Of Venus* by Fox’s favorite author, Edgar Rice

⁹ The development of signature aspects that can be easily identified is crucial to developing a fan base and continuing to be able to produce work. Before assigning credit was common, fans often worked like detectives trying to deduce who did what based on the aspects of the comics they enjoyed. This is shown in the Gardner Fox Collection through the many letters asking Fox if various works were his because they seemed like his prior work.

Burroughs. We can also see Fox's interest in history as men with spears are riding around in chariots, "not unlike the Assyrian war chariots" (65).¹⁰ She soon discovers that the women of the planet are "practically slaves" and an old woman tells her of a legend that one would come and free the women of Venus. In order to help, Wonder Woman determines that she will construct a test where she will match their feats of might because the men of Venus admire strength so much. While she is overpowering each man that comes along, there are several sports references as is common in Fox's work as well as an allusion to dancing when Wonder Woman asks the king if she can "cut in." At one point, she even lifts the King above her head, causing the King to exclaim, "You come from Earth! You would make me think women are treated as men's equals?" To which Wonder Woman replies, "Exactly!" After she bests all the attackers, the King is convinced that women are just as good as men and decides, "From now on, they take their places beside us!" (66). At the end of the story, just like in all of the solo adventures where each hero brings home a scientific secret to help humanity, Wonder Woman is given "herbs," which are described as vegetables that contain all of the vitamins that are known on earth.¹¹ Throughout the story, there are nods to Wonder Woman's prior comics such as a reference to "bullets and bracelets" and a mention of Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons. This solo adventure shows another woman take on both traditionally masculine and feminine attributes with equal value attached to each ending with Fox explicitly stating that women are equal to men. Strictly speaking, it is a

¹⁰ Gardner Fox kept a scrapbook that functioned like a research inspired memory database and it allowed him to include specific references, like the Assyrian war chariots, in much of his work. It is filled with useful information that would provide the "local color," which is what he named the scrapbook, needed for whatever story he was writing. It includes his own hand written notes, newspaper clippings, and many pictures that he used as reference points for his writing.

¹¹ Greg Fox describes his grandmother, Lynda J. Negrini, as an excellent cook. She made a lot of Italian dishes, but she was also good at the traditional 'American' meals. One could imagine his wife's love of cooking as inspiring Fox to give Wonder Woman new vegetables to bring home to Earth and serve up.

Fox-style female empowerment story featuring Wonder Woman. This begs the question: what changes did Marston feel he needed to make?

William Marston rewrote the script because he felt the Gardner Fox's script did not accurately convey the purpose of Wonder Woman, which was a character designed specifically to empower women. As problematic as his stories can sometimes be, most people would consider his writing to be less sexist than Fox's due to her being made a secretary in the stories Fox wrote. This makes a comparison of each script crucial to refute these assumptions. I will be looking at the script Thomas printed in "Two Touches of Venus" instead of the finished product in *All-Star* #13. While many details are changed from Fox's version, Marston stuck with the over all outline in order to match the story with the other solo adventures. One of the first changes is having Aphrodite direct the rocket to Venus. Aphrodite becomes a significant character in later stories, so this was a key addition in addition to emphasizing female agency. Once landed, Wonder Woman discovers that instead of the women being slaves to set free, the women are already in charge. The main conflict comes from "terrible meteor men" that threaten the men of Venus. These meteor men are not a problem for the women of Venus because they can use their wings to fly away from them. Ironically, this is also how the women keep the men of Venus from treating them badly. The narrative rapidly brings in bondage and Wonder Woman seems to like being cuffed on the cheek by the man who she describes as "so big and strong!" (68). This moment is representative of many similar scenes of bondage in Marston's comics and runs in direct contrast to a moment in the unpublished script where Fox wrote Wonder Women saying, "And don't play 'snap the whip' with me, because I don't like it!" Clearly, they had different ideas about what female empowerment looks like. There are more than a few mirrors to Fox's script, though. For

example, when Wonder Woman stops spears with her bracelets stating: “This is child’s play compared to stopping bullets!” which is in reference to the same moment from *All-Star #8* that Fox mentioned. In addition, Marston includes educative factoids about Venus, and a historical reference when Wonder Woman is celebrated in a traditionally Roman way. He also makes use of sports analogies and has Wonder Woman lifting a man above her head just as Fox did. One of the biggest differences is the way that the men refuse to fight fair in Marston’s version. This makes Wonder Woman the upholder of proper behavior; whereas, the meteor men are seen as cheaters whom she must teach a lesson. This difference is key. Along with the rewritten script, Thomas

printed a letter he sent with the rewritten script to Mayer where Marston writes:

You may remember at the very first, I pointed out that when you touch certain universal truths you create universal appeal. I ask you to note the universal truth in my script re war and women taming men so they like peace and love better than fighting. This is the entire aim and purpose of Wonder Woman... (62).

While Fox had a comparable message, the fact that Marston places the men in a morally lower position makes the “universal truth” Marston wanted to teach his readers more obvious. The story ends in a very Marston way with the women of Venus training the Meteor men how to be more loving and peaceful going as far as to have the men eating out of the hands of the women while they are chained to the floor. Wonder Woman finds this delightful, of course, and Queen Desira kisses her earring so that she may guide Wonder Woman in making Earth men just as peaceful. There is a strong sexual undertone in this exchange. This is one aspect of the character

that Fox explicitly avoided in his depictions of Wonder Woman.¹² Rather than nutritious and medical herbs/vegetables, the modified earring is Marston's scientific secret to help Earth. Neither is story is what bad. Each author simply wrote his script from his individual perspective. In the end, Marston's solo adventure is the one that was printed without change in *All-Star* #13.

This rewrite of Fox's script had to have caused more work than editor Sheldon Mayer would have wanted and he generally disliked having to deal with William Marston's level of control, thus prompting him to limit Fox's ability to write the character. As previously stated, this was a result of Marston's history of writing articles for magazines that were capable of influencing the public perception of comics. Marston also had a history of praising Gaines. Exemplifying this personal connection, Marston even constructed a pen name for his comic writings out of a combination of his own and Gaines' middle names: Charles Moulton. Subsequently, Gaines gave him a lot more freedom than other creators. Marston set up Marston Art Studios where the principal artist Harry Peter and other creators produced the comics and Marston personally oversaw every aspect of the production. At least some of the reason that he was so upset with Fox's script could have been because it was produced outside of his studio. Moreover, *Wonder Woman* #1¹³ went on sale right around the same time that Marston must have read Fox's original script, so this rewriting and assertion of the focus he wanted for the character could be seen as a protective move more than anything else. Marston's need for complete control made working with him frustrating for Sheldon Mayer, who was not particularly happy to have Wonder Woman in the

¹² This is not to say that he avoided lesbianism or explicit sexuality. His soft core porn novel *Scandal in Suburbia* contains much of both. This omission is likely an audience consideration as he knew many children read his comics.

¹³ As previously stated, Wonder Woman made her first appearance in JSA (*All-Star* #8). After this, Wonder Woman moved to *Sensation Comics*. What makes *Wonder Woman* #1 (1941) so important is that this was the first time that she carried a title of her own and indeed the first female superhero to do so.

JSA at all. When Robert Kanigher took over writing Wonder Woman after Marston's death, he reported in "Kanigher on Kanigher (and Everything Else!)" that, "[Mayer] was grateful for my taking her off his hands. He hated her" (171). The JSA was designed as an anthology title for characters who did not yet have solo titles. As a result, an in-house rule printed on the last page of *All-Star* #5 (1941) explained that whenever a member received his or her own title, that character would leave the team and become an "honorary member" (206). Mayer would have been quite happy to invoke the rule when *Wonder Woman* #1 debuted, but instead, the publishers actually bent the rules when they decided to make her the secretary of the JSA. This allowed her to continue being a presence in both the introductions and conclusions. While it's tempting to argue that this was because the JSA needed female representation, in all likelihood she remained because of economic reasons: Wonder Woman quickly became a popular character and would therefore sell comics. Still, there are several issues where she is not in the conclusion and a couple she is not in at all. This absence can be further explained by the fact that Marston was busy writing her in three other comics, thus finding the time to write solo adventures for the JSA would have been difficult. In the end, the assertion that Fox is sexist because he made her the secretary of the Justice Society of America is fairly easily refuted as he had very little control over the decision nor the position to protest it once it was made. It really comes down to Marston having a very strong vision of his character and wanting to maintain it across all versions, which would have made him difficult to work with from an editor's position.

Despite the fact that Fox was unable to write many solo adventures for Wonder Woman, he did write for her in the introductions and conclusions of many issues and this allows us to see how he dealt with writing her in the position of secretary for the Justice Society of America.

Much like other creators used side-kicks, one of the ways in which Fox made use of the female partners in his superhero comics was as an identification point for the readers. The superhero cannot be shown as scared or worried in the same way that a reader might be if they were in a similar position, but a civilian partner can. This allows an entry point into the work that may not otherwise be possible. This is shown quite often in his writing of Inza Cramer in *Doctor Fate*. Fox drew on his love of the pulp horror writer H.P. Lovecraft in his writing of Doctor Fate and Inza's fears align with what Fox must have hoped the reader would have been feeling when reading those comics. One example of this is in *More Fun Comics* #85 where Inza, as she does in almost every issue, insists that he takes her with him despite her fear and disgust, thus mirroring the emotions of a reader who is simultaneously drawn in and yet repulsed by the horror in these particular comics (Figure three). It is important to note that she is not looked down upon for her fears and shows herself to be helpful to Doctor Fate just like Shiera Sanders is to Carter Hall in *Hawkman*. This same positioning is at play when Fox writes Wonder Woman in her role as secretary for the JSA. Putting Wonder Woman in the introductions and the conclusions aligns the readers with her in that our responses to the solo adventures are echoed by hers both before and after they are taken on. This is most obvious in the conclusions, but the introduction to "The Justice Society of America Pursues Victory for America and Democracy!" stands out for many critics. One of the most famous panels used to argue for Fox's apparent sexism is on page four where Wonder Woman is shown to be watching the eight official members of the JSA rush off to ensure the delivery of key information to eight inventors. (Figure Three) While the superheroes set out, Wonder Woman watches with a "wistful look" in her eyes as she sates, "Good luck boys- and I wish I could be going with you!" (71). This moment of interiority is unexpected and con-

veys a sense of yearning that highlights her lack of ability in her role as secretary. That said, Most everybody knows what it feels like to be left out making this a particularly powerful panel. This could even be seen as a point of resistance. In a very masculine industry, complete with rumors of creators getting “handsy,” this depiction of Wonder Woman’s inner thoughts shows agency. She is not just the stereotype of a secretary, she has thoughts and feelings just like any other character in the story. Another possible layer of meaning is that Fox himself was “wistful” for the opportunity to write more of her. This is evidenced by the fact that he later wrote for Moon Girl and Super-Woman from Earth Three who are both plays on the character of Wonder Woman. While this panel gets a lot of attention, another panel on the same page is often ignored. After Hawkman points out that there are eight inventors and eight members of the team, we see her taking initiative by pointing out the fact that she is not a regular member and states that she will “Remain at Washington to handle any emergencies that may arise!” in the top right panel (71). She does not ask if that is what they want; she tells them where she will be and what she will be doing. She may wish she could be a full member who got to go off on adventures, but she also knows that her role at the home base is valuable too. As readers, this conjunction invites us to wish we could see her in action just as much she wants to join in while at the same time respecting the way in which she fills her role as secretary.

There are many culturally based assumptions and biases that come into play when one thinks of traditionally feminine roles and interests. This is particularly true when it comes to feminized work.¹⁴ During the 40s, being a secretary was considered women’s work and agency is not

¹⁴ There is a lot of scholarship that has covered the ways in which women operate in the public realms as well as our cultural of understanding feminized labor and how it is devalued. A book that covers many of these subjects is *Hidden Aspects of Women's Work* by Christine E. Bose et al.

something that men would associate with the job because these secretaries were told what to do, and they were supposed to be largely invisible while getting it done. This is what our stereotype of a secretary is based on, and this can be very demeaning to those who do that work. That said, being a high-level secretary was considered a good job by many women at the time and they were proud of the skills and self sufficiency they developed doing it. Embodying this cultural perception, Wonder Woman sometimes does fit the stereotype, but there are also times that run against it such as the moments depicted above. In addition, the members of the JSA are shown to rely on her secretarial skills in several issues, and she often praised for her work. It should also be noted that simply saying it is sexist to make Wonder Woman a secretary carries sexist undertones itself. In “Working Girl: Diana Prince and the Crisis of Career Moves,” Matthew J. Smith states, “And the crux of this line of analysis lies in the presumption that what a hero does for a living — besides being a hero— matters. And it must, for all of the choices our heroes make speak to their character and values” (152). As far as Wonder Woman goes, her values are based around her desire to help others, thus making nursing and secretarial work logical. As a secretary, she not only reminds them of important information, she also is seen as caring and nurturing. Additionally, all of her careers have strong ties to governmental service which speaks to the patriotism that is a major aspect of her origin story. Fundamentally, Smith continues, “It is also about the reader finding access to the hero through their more modest connection to the rest of us” (160). In other words, it is the little recognizable moments in the fantasy that keep it accessible. This is essential because it encourages identification and self reevaluation. An example of this is how a woman from the 40s who loved to cook might feel validated when Wonder Woman brings home food because it implies that she may have been told how to prepare it and gives val-

ue to that process. Our society sees the expression of femininity as something that must be appropriately balanced and this is especially true when it comes to female superheroes.¹⁵ In the same letter that Willian Marston wrote to Sheldon Mayer regarding the rewritten script, he addresses the overt expressions of femininity in relation to Wonder Woman's earrings. As previously mentioned, the issue he rewrote contains a moment where the Queen of Venus, Desira, kisses Wonder Woman's earring giving it the power to transmit her voice to Wonder Woman, thus allowing the Queen to direct the heroes efforts in making earth men more peaceful. His final thoughts on the matter is that it "Gives some point to the earrings, so any objectors to this style of female ornament will now excuse them on the ground that the earrings are wireless receivers" (62). This shows that he felt that the inclusion of the types of ornament that women often wear was potentially a contentious choice.

In conclusion, many people may consider the biggest misstep in Gardner Fox's career as making Wonder Woman the secretary of the Justice Society of America; however, this is not something that Fox was responsible for and any accusations of sexism based only on this must be rejected. Fox believed that all humans should be treated fairly regardless of our slight differences. Through his writing of Wonder Woman, Fox showed that he understood the duality which is a key aspect of her character and promoted equality of the sexes much like he did with his other female characters. Not all of the women he wrote were fighters like Wonder Woman, but they were all intelligent women who were quite capable of taking care of themselves and others. Instead of trying to define a strong woman only through the inclusion of traditionally male attribut-

¹⁵ Cindy P. Lindsay and Janis M. Pasquali explain in "The Wounded Feminine: From Organizational Abuse to Personal Healing" how women use various strategies to deal with gender expectations in a male based work space. They report that women fear that they will not be taken seriously if they show too much femininity and this causes them to define parts of themselves as either "bad" and needing to be hidden or "good" and feel that they must protect those aspects of themselves (3). This is widely studied and applies to many facets of American culture.

es, like many writers do, Fox looks to have used the real life women around him for inspiration, thus providing recognizable women for his fans to identify with. I am not saying that he never showed a touch of sexism in his work, but, whether the women were librarians, secretaries, and nurses, or whether they were scientists, detectives, and superheroes, Fox conveyed a sense of value to the work they did regardless of its social status. This attention to, and inclusion of, female characters is one of the impacts he made on the industry as a whole. In fact, it is the very moments that Fox is labeled as a sexist for that also point to ways in which he is not. Hawkgirl, or Hawkwoman as she called herself the first time she put on the costume, has more fans than her husband. Even Inza Cramer became a superhero herself when she took up her husband's mantle of Doctor Fate. These women have become exemplars of feminine strength and continue to draw attention. In the end, discussions of what makes a person sexist or feminist are simply not productive. We do not live in a black and white world and by limiting our view of him, we are missing the opportunity to see the nuances and positive steps he made within the complicated constellation of interests and forces that shaped his substantial body of work. Much of the media that came out during the Golden and Silver ages of comics was bigoted, but it would do us well to keep looking beyond the obvious to see what may be a moment of growth. It is these individual moments across all mediums that brought us to where we are today. If all men in the comic book industry put in the kind of work Fox appears to have done in regard to his female characters, it would be a much more welcoming space for all readers, including the women who have long struggled to claim a space in a mostly male-dominated industry.

APPENDIX

COMPIC PAGES REFERENCED



Figure One



Figure Two



Figure Three



Figure Four

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