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**Modern feminist history: The Secret History of Wonder Woman by Jill Lepore**

The Secret History of Wonder Woman by Jill Lepore provided readers with a deep dive into the history behind Wonder Woman. Those unfamiliar with the subject were presented with ideas suggesting Wonder Woman was created by a man with sexual deviant tendencies. This is reflected in Wonder Woman as a character. Additionally, she advocated for the birth control movement and balanced the traditional work and family life concept much differently than other women of her time. Upon the death of the creator William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman changed its audience and concept. Unlike other comic books of the time, there was a strong female dominance superiority within Wonder Woman. However, this caused problems for the feminist movement, making it a poor framework for feminism as time passed.

**Impacts of debates on non-conventional sex, work and family balance, and birth control on Wonder Woman**

Wonder Woman was not simply created overnight. It was created in 1941, and was influenced by prior decades of feminist relations. The creator of Wonder Woman was William Moulton Marston. William Moulton Marston had a unique home life that many men of the time did not, or were not open about having. This included non-conventional sex and a unique home and family balance. Wonder Woman was created in part based on his home life.

Marston was a professor of psychology, and while he was teaching at Tufts University, he met Olive Byrne. They had a relationship, and after she graduated, she moved in with him and his wife (p. 117). After she moved in, they eventually had a child together. Byrne stopped her psychology work and instead raised Marston’s children he had with Olive and his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston. The book said that Marston and Byrne decided to live in a non-normal way. (p. 118). After Marston died Olive and Elizabeth remained living together for several years (p. 273).

The unique relationship between Marston, Byrne, and Holloway directly impacted Wonder Woman. In a direct relationship between the two, you find that Wonder Woman wears gold bracelets on her wrist. Those are the same bracelets that Marston, Byrne, and Holloway wore. These were to represent their marriage (p.131). In one copy of Wonder Woman, she removes her bracelets and realizes that she is if she does not have the bracelets, she becomes destructive. She thinks that being destructive without the bracelets is like how a man is destructive (p.216). If the women that Marston was with were not tied to him, they both would have likely pursued more advanced careers. Additionally in Wonder Woman there was more intense sexual bondage scenes. The author Jill leopard tries to illustrate the fact that these sexual scenes were heavily influenced from the sexual relationship that Marston, Byrne, and Holloway had. Critics of the time did not appreciate these scenes, and many tried to change them. Max Gaines, head of the DC Comics, forwarded letters to Marston of people explaining that Wonder Woman needed to reduce the use of change by chains by at least 50 to 75% (p. 242).

Before Marston was a professor, and still a student at Harvard, he went to see Emmeline Pankhurst speak. The young man who saw the feminist activist from the England never forgot her impact and never forgot what she said (p. 12). He drew on arguments of feminist like Pankhurst and others and used those arguments in Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman was an advocate of birth control. After women gained the right to vote, the suffragist’s changed their arguments to the idea of birth control and voluntarily motherhood. In the Wonder Woman back story, Captain Steve Trevor crashes his plane on Paradise Island and the Princess of Amazons (Wonder Woman) falls in love with him. On this island, men learned that if they wanted to be with a woman there needed to be equality. And this meant equality everywhere including the bedroom. Women needed a way to prevent from getting pregnant. They needed to be able to have consensual recreational sex much like men can (p. 87). This is the idea of voluntary motherhood and was an argument that feminist had. Margaret Sanger was a huge birth control advocate. Her niece was Olive Byrne, one of Marston’s wives.

**Wonder Woman changes after death of Marston**

In 1947, William Marston was diagnosed with cancer. It rapidly metastasized and he died. Until his last week on earth, William Marston was working on Wonder Woman (p. 258). Upon his death Wonder Woman began to change. Seven months after Marston died, Holloway begin to request that she work on Wonder Woman. She was not satisfied with the comics that came out after his death. Holloway acknowledged that the comics that came shortly after Marston’s death were created from half written scripts that he left behind (p.261). Holloway was not keen on this and wanted to take over writing.

Holloway wrote a letter to Jack Leibowitz asking if she could be a writer or editor of Wonder Woman. He denied her and cut her out of all production of Wonder Woman. She wanted to continue to illustrate Marston’s voice, so she wrote a long letter explaining all of the details that someone needed to know when writing Wonder Woman. Her letter was filed away, and Robert Kanigher took over the writing (p. 264).

Shortly after the letter was sent to Kanigher, the direction of Wonder Woman was completely changed. This change was not just because of a new writer, but also because of *Winters v. New York*. This Supreme Court case overruled a New York state code that did not allow crime to be glamorized in comic books. It was proceeded that words like indecent and disgusting have no meaning in common law. Once this rule was overturned, more indecent material could be distributed in places like New York. At that point, more psychiatrists were exposed to it and argued against comics like Wonder Woman.

Eventually there were US Senate hearings against comic books to be banned nationwide. Fredric Wertham, a German psychiatrist, wrote *Seduction of the Innocent* which made direct claims against Wonder Woman. Wertham thought that the feminism that was found in Wonder Woman was vile. In his novel, which was found in Lepore’s book, he wrote, “They are not homemakers they do not bring up a family. Mother love is entirely absent... Even when Wonder Woman adopts a girl there are lesbian overtones,” (p.269). Nothing was directly to come from the hearings.

Instead after the US Senate subcommittee met, comic books agreed to voluntarily censor themselves with a code like the Hays code. The new code permitted anything violent or obscene. And there was to be no violent love scenes. Or any sort of sexual abnormality. During the time that Wonder Woman was originally created homosexual relationships were considered abnormal (p.270). In essence, the Wonder Woman who used to be a sign of women in power was going to be changed. Lepore illustrated this in the book when she said Wonder Woman became something totally different. She wanted to be things like a fashion model or work in the home. And she desired to marry a man (p. 271). Wonder Woman followed the women who lived post World War Two. Suppression against women continued into the 1960s and 1970s when birth control was legalized for women across the nation.

**Female dominance superiority complex in the original comics**

The fight for birth control, right to vote, and equal pay among other things all allude to women being in power. Wonder Woman was a woman in power. She possesses the female dominance superiority complex. In its most basic terms this is the idea that women were more powerful and dominant than men. Wonder Woman is a dominant figure in multiple different occasions throughout the book. This was unprecedented in other comics. Wonder Woman was a tool to gather support for female causes through her power. However, this was not a good framework for feminism. The theory of feminism is that there is equality between men and women based on sex. If women are more powerful than men, than there is not equality.

As mentioned above, Wonder Woman had bracelets which provided her power against men. She was dominant over them if she had the bracelets on. If she didn't have the bracelets on, she became a monster, something that was to destroy everything in her path. For example, when the United States was in World War Two, she was a military secretary that was able to help with the war effort. Additionally in the comics Wonder Woman was able to fight the Japanese and Germans (p.216). Little girls and women who read the Wonder Woman comics were inspired by her to join the war effort. Whenever president Franklin D Roosevelt created the women's army auxiliary corps over 100,000 women joined the army. The women were able to fill roles that were traditional for a woman to do. This freed the men so that they could fight in more combative roles. Wonder Woman's dominance over men, whether they be American, Japanese, or German, inspired women to get involved in the fight.

Depending on the global perspective inspiring women to fight against the Japanese or German was a good thing. However, there was other instances that Wonder Woman was dominant over men that did not promote good results. Throughout the Wonder Woman comics, she was often tied up and beat. But she was always able to come back and attack the attackers worse. Most of the attackers were men. However, psychiatrist Wertham learned of a story involving a four-year-old girl who was tied up and beat by young boys at her apartment complex. They had been inspired by Wonder Woman to attack young girls (p. 265). This young girl did not have the strength to overpower and dominate the boys.

In addition to the story of the young girl, Wertham looked at a story of a juvenile delinquent who was a 14-year-old girl. She took after Wonder Woman and caused chaos in her town (p. 269). Instances like these prove that the strong female dominance was not a good framework for feminism. Psychiatrist and critics were able to point out instances where wonder woman inspired violence and discredit the whole movement of feminism. Just as Wonder Woman changed after Marston died, after World War Two feminism died down. Wonder Woman was not able to sustain a large feminist movement after being discredited for violence and deviant sexual behavior.

Today Wonder Woman is still presented as a powerful woman that advocates for female rights. The modern Wonder Woman does not have the same personality as the original Wonder Woman. They do not illustrate sexual deviant tendencies or advocating for the birth control movement like the creator William Marston intended. But as it was shown in The Secret History of Wonder Woman by Jill Lepore, Wonder Woman has been changing since the death of Marston. Early in its history, Wonder Woman did not hold as a strong presentation of feminism, but it’s adaptation over time has brought the character to its stature today – a paragon of feminism.