LYCRA, LEGS, AND LEGITIMACY: PERFORMANCES OF FEMININE POWER IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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As a child, when I consumed fictional narratives that centered on strong female characters, all I noticed was the enviable power that they exhibited. From my point of view, every performance by a powerful character like Wonder Woman, Daisy Duke, or Princess Leia, served to highlight her drive, ability, and intellect in a wholly uncomplicated way. What I did not notice then was the often-problematic performances of female power that accompanied those narratives. As a performance studies and theatre scholar, with a decades’ old love of all things popular culture, I began to ponder the troubling question: Why are there so many popular narratives focused on female characters who are, on a surface level, portrayed as bastions of strength, that fall woefully short of being true representations of empowerment when subjected to close analysis?

In an endeavor to answer this question, in this dissertation I examine what I contend are some of the paradoxical performances of female heroism, womanhood, and feminine aggression from the 1960s to the 1990s. To facilitate this investigation, I engage in close readings of several key aesthetic and cultural texts from these decades. While the Wonder Woman comic book universe serves as the centerpiece of this study, I also consider troublesome performances and representations of female power in the television shows Bewitched, I Dream of Jeannie, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the film Grease, the stage musical Les Misérables, and the video game Tomb Raider. Allied with my analyses of these cultural texts, I examine the historical context of these final four decades of the twentieth century by focusing on several significant social and political moments and movements, such as the rise of first-and second-wave feminism, Reagan-era conservatism, and the scandals that brought Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky into the public
eye in the 1990s. Throughout my study, I focus on issues including, but not limited to, the performance of feminism, representations of the female body, and the pernicious and deeply embedded nature of traditional gender roles.

In terms of findings, this study reveals that despite the progress that has been made in such areas as increased health benefits for women, the narrowing of the gender gap in pay, and more positive portrayals of feminine aggression in popular culture, there is still a great deal of work to be done regarding the overall performance of female power. Indeed, there remains a dearth of performances that do not hypersexualize women, link their power to that of their male counterparts, or villainize those who exercise strength and threaten the status quo. In sum, my hope is that this study will prompt a reevaluation of the narrative structures and icons deemed “feminist,” performances of womanhood that are praised as wholly and unproblematically positive, and texts that are considered unambiguously empowering, thus encouraging more responsible representations in years to come.
For Lincoln.

Pay attention, son.

There will be a test.
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INTRODUCTION: IT’S A PARADOX

My earliest recollection of my love for superheroes was when I was a child of four, sitting in my aunt's apartment in New York City. I saw a television spot for a show that would be airing in moments, and, due in no small part to my horrific grasp on spelling, I thought the upcoming program was entitled "Banana Man." Once the show began, it was not long before a character on the show referred to actor Adam West’s character as "Batman." I was memorized. With that introduction in the late 1970s, my obsession with superheroes began.

As I matured through the 1980s, doing my best to soak up all that American popular culture had to offer, my interest in the “hero” moved beyond comic books to movies, musicals, television shows, and cartoons. The Empire Strikes Back (1980), the GI Joe cartoon series (1985), the Dukes of Hazzard (1979), along with the various heroes from DC and Marvel Comics, were just a few of the hero-centered entertainments from my childhood that I enjoyed. At the same time, though perhaps unbeknownst to me at the time, these entertainments began to shape my understanding of masculinity, femininity, and power. To be sure, as I reflect on my developmental years spanning the 1980s, I now view the Cold War tensions and Ronald Reagan’s conservative leadership as the cultural incubator that nurtured films such as Top Gun (1986), Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), and Ghostbusters (1984), which deftly showcased white, male power (i.e., patriarchy) as the norm. While I certainly enjoyed these and other male-centered narratives, I nonetheless recall that I almost always found myself more interested in the likes of Carrie Fisher’s Princess Leia, Wonder Woman, and Batgirl. I would like to think that these were not, wholly, the simple infatuations of a pubescent African-American boy; rather, I firmly believe that I subconsciously began to see in these heroines’ idealized characteristics – in particular, their resilience, relentless determination, and drive – reflections of my single mother.
As a preteen, I did not yet understand the often-problematic, paradoxical ways in which powerful female characters were performed in popular culture. All I saw were women characters exercising the types of power that were more typically relegated to men – principally white men – in popular narratives. As my father was not a part of my life, I saw my mother’s life, in both the domestic and professional spheres, as actions that were shared by both the mothers and the fathers of my peers. I was always impressed by the ways in which she navigated the worlds that she occupied, juggling her management responsibilities at work, devotion to her church, and unflinching commitment to raising me. In that regard, my mother was a superhero to me.

As sentimental as this claim seems, these observations about the heroic qualities in my mother spurred in me a particular respect for the superheroines that occupied the fictional worlds that I found fascinating. While I loved the likes of Batman, Superman, and Spiderman, I nonetheless always found it most compelling when a woman was administering justice in the same ways that a man traditionally did. I am certain that I saw a little bit of my mother in all the fictional females I spent my time with, from Nancy Drew in my books, to the X-Men’s Ororo Monroe in my comics, to Doris Day in my movies. My mother was as bold as Daisy Duke (albeit dressed far more sensibly), and as smart as The Dick Van Dyke Show’s Mary Tyler Moore (albeit with far fewer pairs of capris).

My love for these fictions has not fallen away over all these years. Even so, as an adult, I have become far more critically aware of the heroine’s representation in popular culture. The question of why those representations trouble me is what initially spurred me on to engage in this study. In sum, I believe that there are many examples in which female characters who are credited with being powerful, when subjected to close analysis, are not actually portrayed as such. As I look over the list of fictional names that comprise my list of influential heroines –
Susan Storm, Jean Grey, Diana Prince, and Ororo Munroe, to name a few – I see a disparity between the potential for strength, independence, and power inherent in these characters, and the level of agency that is granted them. If my mother, a manager at an electrical company in Fairbanks, Alaska, can survive and thrive without the help of a burly, gun-toting, take-charge patriarchal figure, why are not the female characters on television, in movies, and on the stage allowed to do the same? While it would be reductive and incorrect to suggest that every heroine, super or otherwise, has been forced into the same category of helpless sex kitten with a penchant for violence, and requiring male-guidance, I suggest that what could be considered an equal representation of power between male and female heroes is something relatively new, and still far from universal.

This fledgling sense of relative equality is a far cry from the way things were in the early 1940s, when Wonder Woman was first introduced in Action Comics. As I began to dig deeply into the history of that character that undergirds this study, I found that, not only was Wonder Woman a valuable case study due to her longevity and repeated resurgence in popularity throughout the second half of twentieth century, but also that she could provide a telling glimpse into the ways that the performance of the superheroine – and more importantly, the powerful female character – changed throughout that same time period. While, as a cisgender male, I necessarily approach this topic from a place of remove, I nevertheless seek to provide a nuanced and generative analysis, informed by feminist theory.

Wonder Woman, created by William Marsten and H. G. Peter in 1941, has been portrayed as a hero, a feminist icon, an anti-hero, and a protector of humanity against the strange and seemingly unyielding power of the gods. As Marsten claimed soon after her creation, "Wonder Woman encourages women to stand up for themselves, to learn to fight, and be strong,
so they don't have to be scared, or depend on men" (Ley). As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, however, many popular versions of Wonder Woman, reincarnated during several key moments in American history of the second half of the twentieth century, do not necessarily fall in line with Marsten's idealistic vision of the feminist hero. Two central goals of my dissertation, then, are to chart the ways in which Wonder Woman has made her way through American popular culture, shifting from protector of American life to feminist icon to anti-hero (to name just a few of her incarnations), and to interrogate the ways in which this mercurial character reflects the changing landscape of feminism, as well as certain ever-evolving definitions and performances of femininity, in the twentieth century and, correspondingly, into the twenty-first. Regarding the latter point, as Wonder Woman has consistently been both a product of her time and a model for popular representations of women within popular culture, I find myself wondering how her narratives reflect the changing social and cultural values of modern America, and how this character’s evolution has sparked changes in other popular narratives about women throughout the years.

Questions such as these are central to the field of performance studies, as two of its primary aims are to interrogate how performative representations reflect and shape cultural values and norms, and to show these representations, or performances, change over time. I believe that the impact of my research, however, can move beyond the realms of popular culture studies and performance studies, to benefit fields such as American culture studies, film and theatre history, media and visual anthropology, youth culture studies, and even mythology studies, as I examine the gendered assumptions at play in popular narrative strategies. Throughout, I seek to remain cognizant of the host of material and ideological forces at play in the creation of these narratives – including history, culture, economies, and aesthetics (both
personal and industry driven) – but my focus is primarily on the force such representations and interpretations of female identity, that are consumed in comic books, in the movies, on television, and on the stage, have on our culture. My focus is thus less on the work done in the service of their creation, and more on the work they did and continue to do in culture. I hold that if there is to be any hope for the advent of a more equitable, non-patriarchal society, this media, and the performances therein, must be subjected to critical scrutiny, as they are arenas used by consumers to construct values and knowledge about female identity and representation.

Central to my study then is an attempt to answer what is my key research question: As American culture has changed over the decades, how have those changes affected Wonder Woman, and the creative teams who assemble her comic books, cartoons, and movies? Unlike Black Venus, Betty Bates, Lady at Law, and many other superheroines from the 1940s, Wonder Woman’s presence has pervaded popular culture since her debut. By charting the ebb and flow of performances of her power and independence, and by comparing her stories to those of several other popular fictive women from the 1960s to the 1990s, this study aims to pinpoint common problematic representational choices and proposes new strategies for engaging in more responsible representational and performative practices.

As the preceding paragraphs makes clear, comic books are not the only arena that interests me in this study, as questions concerning female representation and performance can be asked of all popular entertainments: How have representations of women in the West generally and in the US specifically, particularly within the areas of film, television, and the stage, changed between the 1940s and today? How can an examination of popular culture and key historical events be used to track these changes and root them within a particular time? How do these changes work in tandem with or oppose the archetype or the mythology of the hero/heroine? In
light of these question, in the course of this study I endeavor to do more than offer a simple or focused analysis of the Wonder Woman comic books, precisely because I contend they are part of a larger repertoire – to borrow a term from performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor – from which they cannot be isolated. In this study I seek to move far beyond the relatively small media niche of the comic book, and instead "pay attention to milieu and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones" that have been ascribed to both Wonder Woman and female heroines throughout the years (Taylor 28). There are foundational elements about Wonder Woman and women heroes in general that have existed for decades, elements that inform the way that she, and other superheroines, are performed today.

In sum, then, I have sought to consider the politics of female representation and the ways in which that representation can shape culture, and vice-versa, in both positive and negative ways. In this regard, I believe that one of the important outcomes of this study lies in forging a conversation between studies of mediatized culture and studies about performance and theatre. More precisely, in this study I grapple with the following thorny question: How does the performance of the heroic female across popular media inform or change the ways in which female identity is performed or examined in everyday reality? I contend that through an examination of female characters within popular culture, and the corresponding investigation of the structures and behaviors of characters like Wonder Woman, the qualities and attributes of these heroes will be shown to exist not solely in the plots of their stories or in the titles that imply their power, but also in the constructions of gestures, languages, postures, and performances that have been culled for the repertoire of popular culture. I hold that this approach adds to the larger scholarly conversation concerning Wonder Woman. In this regard I see this study as a continuation of the important work done by the likes of Travis Langley and Mara Wood who in
Wonder Woman Psychology: Lassoing the Truth explore the mythos of Wonder Woman through an understanding of theories of sexual dominance and inducement, and Signe Bergstrom who in Wonder Woman: Ambassador of Truth, tracks Wonder Woman’s movement though popular culture from the viewpoint of various creative teams. My study, however, moves beyond those of these scholars in that it endeavor to situate her in relation to other powerful female characters, in variety of media, from the 1940s to the 1990s.

Given my central interest in the representation of women heroes, in the course of this study I call upon the work of several notable scholars whose work is foundational to the study of gender, representation, and the complex histories of the popular entertainments I examine. For example, one cannot look at powerful female characters without bringing the issue of aggression to bear, and Maud Lavin’s Push Comes to Shove: New Images of Aggressive Women, addresses the ways in which we relate to the aggression of the superhero. Regarding this, Lavin writes:

Aggression rolls through our bodies and our psyches. We can express it as a key ingredient of anger, of determination, of movement forward, or space clearing, of lust, or harm, of survival, of creation. We can enjoy it. Or we can be afraid not only of aggression expressed toward us, but also of our own aggression. (3)

Lavin’s assessment informs my analysis of the significant role that aggression plays in popular narratives of powerful female characters, such as Wonder Woman. While I am aware that the term “aggression” in the colloquial is often seen as a negative, an “aggressive” woman can be considered to be working against a double disadvantage—being woman and aggressive, I opt for the continued usage of Lavin’s term in this study. Lavin’s definition calls for more than “harm to others”, and instead defines itself as the drive within women to assert their agency (3).
In order to fully demonstrate how the role of the superheroine has evolved over the decades, I also engage in a close, critical analysis of the extant studies on that subject, principle among them Mike Madrid’s *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*. This book examines the origins and early histories of superheroines like Wonder Woman, highlighting the ways in which these fictional women bore the imprints of their political, social, and cultural milieu. While Madrid’s work is particularly valuable in its mapping of the American comic book superhero, and their fashion, from the 1940s-2000s, I take his analysis a step further by examining works that explore constructions of gender norms beyond the comic book scenario.

While I envision this study as an attempt to expand on the work of those scholars who have previously addressed comic books and comic culture, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, usefully informs my analysis of the social and political backdrops of the decades I examine. While my analysis of the political and popular culture of the 1980s is particularly influenced by Anderson’s commentary, throughout the study his thinking on the ways in which communities are constructed around particular literatures and ideologies has been instrumental.

The comic book culture, and indeed popular culture writ large, is one that has had a vexed relationship with feminism. Take for example *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*, a 2012 documentary that explores Wonder Woman's place within popular culture. Director Kristy Guevara-Flanigan told *Wired* magazine, “I just thought, ‘[Wonder Woman is] important in all these different moments historically, and wouldn’t it be interesting to hang up a larger dialog about women as heroes and women represented in popular culture and use her as a vehicle to guide that?’” (Watercutter). Like Guevara-Flanigan, I am
drawn to the concept, the character, and the performances of Wonder Woman in part because I believe they can usefully inform a discussion about the ways that feminism and feminist studies have changed from the 1960s through the 1990s.

In some respects, this has led me to think about the importance of the body, and the way that the body is used in the performance of fiction. As such, I call on feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” a foundational text to my analysis of the male gaze within movies and comic books, the sexual fetishizing of heroines, popular culture’s representation of the powerful female body, and its performance of the political, and the powerful. More broadly, though, because this dissertation will facilitate an evaluation of the performance of feminine power within popular entertainments, and by extension, popular consciousness, from the 1960s through the 1990s, I look to feminism as a methodological lens by which to map the paradoxes that I have identified. This methodology has led me to pursue answers to the following questions: Can feminist messages within Wonder Woman narratives truly be empowering if she is then defined by her romantic attachment to a man? Why is feminine aggression accepted within particular scenarios and vilified in others? How are there performances of feminine power that resist patriarchal hegemony, while at the same time reinforcing that same system of power?

The primary method by which I chart these paradoxes, and support my methodology, is close readings of key texts, both aesthetic and cultural, with a particular focus on how the women in those texts perform heroism and femininity. These readings are driven by an awareness of the sexist and gendered assumptions at play in these cultural outpourings, with an eye toward how those assumptions are intersectional (including sex, class, race, and ethnicity), historical (they are of a certain time, and thus reflect the assumptions of a particular moment), and, perhaps above
all else, paradoxical. Regarding the latter, as the following study seeks to demonstrate, I am most interested in the ways in which the representation of heroines is one that tends to put those figures in the untenable position of having to perform the actions of male heroes, all the while maintaining some semblance of the performance of traditional femininity. While doing this analysis I draw on the work of several feminist scholars and activist writers, including Gloria Steinem, Susan Faludi, and Stacy Wolf. The works of these writers, and others, both historical and contemporary, is used to support my close readings.

Before offering an overview of the chapters, it warrants noting that I have sought to remain cognizant of the fact that readers are coming to this project with various levels of knowledge about the subject matter. Likewise, I have endeavored to ensure that my love for the subject does not cloud my objectivity. My interest in this investigation stems, again, from the realization that the presence of a formidable female presence on the stage, on TV, or in the movies, does not guarantee that the character is going to be well-rounded, empowered, or solely in control of her power. As popular culture and mass media are expressions of our society’s anxieties, constructions of power, values, and fashions, this study serves as an interrogation of what popular representations of women have revealed concerning particular moments within American society throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

In this study, each chapter takes examples from film, television, and/or live theatre, and analyzes them against the backdrop of the decade that they are in. I then take the findings from the decade and use them as a lens by which to examine scenarios of Wonder Woman and the messages therein. My choice of subject matter for these case studies was primarily determined by the object broad mass appeal. Hence, for example, in Chapter I, I offer focused readings of *Bewitched* (1964) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965), not because there were no other television
shows of the era featuring female characters, but because of the enormous popular success of both situational comedies, both at the time of their creation and in subsequent years. Likewise, in Chapter II, I choose the movie adaptation of *Grease* for my case study as opposed to the staged version of that title, as the movie adaptation had a far larger, broader, mass appeal. Throughout the study, then, my choices are largely driven by the popularity of the object with widespread audiences.

Chapter One focuses on the 1960s, a decade that saw notable change in the ways in which female power and sexuality were performed in popular media. As prequal to that primary point of investigation, I look first at the 1940s and 1950s, and consider the paradoxical vision William Moulton Marston had for the character he created, Wonder Woman. In sum, in the opening pages of this chapter I seek to make clear that from the start, Wonder Woman embodied a paradoxical assumption. While the 1960s saw many revolutionary moments and movements, I position Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as a crucial bellwether. With the publication of this landmark work, Friedan uncovered a pre-World War II falsehood that had been fed to the American housewife – simply put, that the traditional roles of housewife and mother were enough to fulfill the American woman. Friedan’s findings flew in the face of what America had been taught about wives and mothers by the performances previously established in popular culture by works such as *I Love Lucy* (1951), *The Honeymooners* (1955), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958). I argue that these televised narratives, served up as situational comedies to American audiences, were increasingly incompatible with current ideas about female empowerment that were creating widening ripples in the political and cultural waters of the decade. In response to these new cultural winds, two new sitcoms were introduced in the mid-1960s, both presenting powerful women in ways that televised comedy never had: ABC’s
*Bewitched* (1964-1972), and NBC’s *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970). I argue that while these shows constituted a crucial step forward from some of the more traditional narratives that had preceded them, both ultimately serve as case studies highlighting the oftentimes problematic, paradoxical representation of American women during the decade. In the section that follows, I offer a brief history of the comic book industry, focusing on the rules and regulations that governed its content in the 1960s. After providing a glimpse into the comic book’s place in the cultural climate of the 1960s, I conclude my first chapter by returning to Wonder Woman to examine the mishandling of both Diana Prince as a powerful heroine, and the feminist messages that Marston claimed were vital to Wonder Woman’s character construction.

Chapter Two focuses on the 1970s. I begin by charting the larger context of the era, which involved many Americans becoming disillusioned with their government, particularly in response to the wildly unpopular war in Vietnam. After exploring this rich and vexed historical context, I move on to an analysis of the movie *Grease* (1978), drawing on Victor Turner’s theory of the social drama, to draw parallels between that wildly popular movie and the social schism prompted by the sexual revolution of the 1970s. As does chapter one, chapter two concludes with a return to questions surrounding the paradoxical representation of Wonder Woman’s power. Here, however, the study begins to pinpoint the ways in which paradox, while a constant through line from decade to decade, also mutates and changes from decade to decade, conforming to the social consciousness of the cultural moment. To that end, while Wonder Woman of the 1970s touted the feminist messages of that historical moment, her agency and power continued to be paradoxically either regulated by the patriarchal figures in her life or muted by the hyper-sexualization of her character.

Whereas chapters one and two open with considerations of the broader cultural context of
the 1960s and 1970s respectively, chapter three focuses on the 1980s and begins with an analysis of popular music megastar Madonna. The award-winning musician made a name for herself in the 1980s, and both her music and her public persona suggested, on a surface level, that she was fighting for sexual liberation and empowerment. I argue, however, that Madonna also willingly embraced her own sexual objectification, via the heterosexual male gaze, in the name of success; in this way, she serves as a useful example of the continued presence of paradoxical constructions of female identity. In my assessment of Madonna’s positioning within popular culture, I strive to remember that the disempowered are often put into an untenable position, where they are criticized for being complicate with hegemonic oppressive systems of power. Performance studies scholars and feminist studies scholars alike point to the ways in which people from disempowered groups uses the resources available to them, in the case of Madonna her hypersexuality, many times as the only means by which they can fight against systems of oppression.

From an examination of Madonna’s rise to stardom and her complex performance of self, I move on to an exploration of the success of the mega-musical *Les Misérables* on Broadway. The popularity of this musical, with its paradoxically-constructed female characters, suggest that American audiences of the decade were entertained by performances that bolstered male-empowering social systems. In studying Madonna’s influence, I am led to ask, to whom Madonna’s message of resistance and empowerment was aimed. Similarly, *Les Misérables* leads me to ask why poorly-represented female characters in a British musical resonated so soundly with American audiences. In an attempt to answer these questions, I offer an analysis of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. As I look at the “Reagan Era,” I argue by way of Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined community, that Reagan’s was a performance of “patriarchal nationalism.” In
sum, Reagan’s performance, while designed to control the morality of America like a stern patriarch, was also an attempt to highlight America’s might. This chapter concludes by looking at Wonder Woman as a site of resistance against the conservative messages that Reagan touted. After a brief overview of changes that transformed the comic book industry at large, I go on to discuss the significant work that Wonder Woman’s new creative team did to speak out against messages that advocated for traditional gender norms. As was the case with Madonna’s paradoxical construction of self, however, Wonder Woman’s new creative team also sought to use hyper-sexualization to reinforce male power and fantasy fulfillment.

The focus of my final chapter is the 1990s, and the importance of feminine aggression. The chapter begins with an analysis of the popular video game *Tomb Raider* (1996) and the game’s protagonist, Lara Croft. Croft, while performing physical feats traditionally performed by male characters, serves as an example of both female aggression and the propping up of male fantasy fulfillment. The immensely popular franchise, which has since had its narratives retooled to create more overt feminist messages, is another example of popular culture being molded by the sentiment of its particular decade. From this point, I move on to examine the performance of femininity, power, and heroism in television’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997). The show, a coming-of-age supernatural soap opera, has the titular character fighting the forces of the underworld to save her friends, her family, and the world. The Buffy-mythos, in conceit, is home to many empowering feminist messages, and while many those messages are handled in an effective manner, I highlight the moments in which Buffy’s power is connected to the erasure of her femininity, or the patriarchal control that male characters exercise over her. I then move on to a consideration of the larger cultural consciousness that surrounded these fictional narratives, considering specifically the events surrounding Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky. While the
circumstances surrounding their use of aggression are very different, it is also nonetheless true that both women, caught in firestorms of politics, media attention, and public scrutiny, were forced to take aggressive stands for their social and personal survival. Moreover, as I assert, both women also were vilified, on some level, for the aggression they exerted against a well-established, political, male-centric power structure. In the end, it is the similarities between the stories of Hill and Lewinski, not their differences, that drive my inquiry and will be the focus of both case studies.

In the final pages of this chapter, I return once again to Wonder Woman, to focus specifically on DC’s attempts to make Wonder Woman a “darker,” “grittier” entity without diminishing her credibility as an ambassador of peace within the world of men. While Diana was allowed a type of aggression to which she was not accustomed, the impact of her new, more violent, antagonism is rendered insignificant as she was not carrying the moniker of Wonder Woman at the time.

In the end, with this dissertation I have sought to trace a thread that highlights hero narratives involving women that paradoxically fail to empower women. In doing so, I hope that my study will instigate further conversations the performance of female power, and how that representation is bolstered or belittled within social, cultural, and political arenas. It is through a studying and understanding of the performance texts of the past that we can aspire to create empowering performance texts in the future.
CHAPTER I: EXPECTATIONS IN DANGER (1960s)

It has oft been said that the 1960s were a time of enormous change in the United States. This spirit of change spread rapidly through the nation, and affected small- and large-scale revolution in society, popular culture, and politics. The story of the decade reads as a catalog of iconic political figures such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. who challenged the status quo and advocated for change through words and actions, as well as groundbreaking social movements and strident protests for peace and civil rights, which would mark the 1960s as a decade of profound political transformation. Another irrevocable shift in this remarkable decade challenged and reshaped the traditional view of women’s places and roles in society.

To understand the extent of this change, one must first look at the conditions under which many American women lived before the turn of the decade. During World War II, women had been urged to do their part for the war effort; in turn, many took up work in factories, building guns, ships, and munitions. After the war ended in 1946, however, many women returned to their previously-held traditional roles in the home, relinquishing their places in the so-called “man’s world.” This return to traditional roles brought with it a focus on family during the latter half of the 1940s and through the 1950s. The increase in childbirths and marriages during this era were greater during this period than they had been during any other post-war era in the history of the United States; for example, “the period after World War I, had not led to such dramatic increases in marriage and childbearing” (“Women and Work After World War II”). In Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Elaine Tyler May suggests that this shift stems from more than an appreciation of post-war peace. She argues, “Strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military might and territorial expansion to achieve world domination. [. . .] Americans turned to the family as a bastion of safety in an insecure
world [. . .] cold war ideology and the domestic revival [were] two sides of the same coin” (9). Many believed that the myriad perceived foreign and domestic dangers to America – including not only the fear of domination by the Soviets, but also, as I will discuss in this chapter, the anxiety regarding the emancipation of women – could be assuaged by returning to and expanding upon the tenets of the traditional, nuclear American family. In sum, maintaining the role of the traditional stay-at-home mother and wife was, for many, a matter of national interest.

While these traditional values were highly evident in the social politics in the years immediately following the war, by the 1960s, a significant number of American women were growing weary with their restrictive nature. As more and more women found themselves stifled and suffocated by the limitations of the traditional roles afforded them, the powerful (or seemingly empowered) female character grew more ubiquitous in the popular imagination. From the world of popular culture, Marilyn Monroe pressed against the hegemony of traditional expectations for women to remain as demure, modest housewives, while Julie Newmar made similar strides in her portrayal of Catwoman in the 1960s television show, Batman. Regarding the latter, Newmar’s Catwoman was rendered by the show’s creators as a shrewd villain who, time and time again, created difficult obstacles for the heroes, Batman and Robin. Thus, it could be argued that, as a villain, the performance of Catwoman possessed a level of power primarily reserved for the likes of her male counterparts, including the Joker and the Penguin. Nonetheless, when considering the form-fitting leather body suit she wore, or her inclination to use seduction as her primary tool, the highly vexed nature of her representation becomes clear. As I will argue in this chapter, Newmar’s Catwoman is an example of a larger social trend: during the years immediately following World War II through 1960s, women were becoming simultaneously more present and more absent in popular culture representations, as well as in their own social
spheres. They were frequently asked to inhabit a paradoxical space, granted considerable power through increased visibility on the one hand, while being stripped of that power through a process of hyper-sexualization and objectification on the other.

DC Comic’s Wonder Woman was not immune to this move to simultaneously empower and restrict female characters, and in this chapter, I will provide a more nuanced critique of the character’s agency and subjectivity during the 1960s, moving beyond monikers such as “the most famous superheroine of all time, a bastion of female representation in a male-dominated genre” (Hanley loc 66), to examine the paradoxical performing of both her power and her vulnerability. This chapter begins with an interrogation of Wonder Woman’s creator, William Moulton Marston, and the allegedly feminist viewpoints that led him to develop the character. Broadening my scope, I then examine specific moments in American popular culture of the 1960s which exemplify the changing gender expectations of the era and demonstrate the paradoxical position women often occupied, further tracking the presence of the paradoxical female body and voice in two representative case studies: the wildly popular television shows *Bewitched* (ABC 1964-72) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC 1965-70).

From there, I return to my primary area of study, the comic book, briefly touching on the advent of the medium itself, noting cultural forces that brought about its rise, how it changed in relation to its surrounding context, and the subsequent creation of the 1954 Comic Book Code, which altered in profound ways the way that comic books stories were conceived and consumed. The Code, created by the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), was designed to establish regulations in the wake of psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham’s crusade against violence and indecency in comic books. In his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, he placed blame for juvenile delinquency on the doorstep of the comic book industry without providing any
documentation, “footnotes or bibliographies to verify his research. He simply expected readers to trust his evidence and conclusions based on the basis of his own expert credentials” (Wright 158). While Seduction of the Innocent may not have been a wholly responsible piece of research, it nonetheless fed on the fears that were a part of the cultural landscape in the mid-1950s. Groups such as The General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the American Legion, and the Catholic National Organization for Decent Literature, had already been working to get violent comic books taken from newsstands, and with “juvenile delinquency already the focus of intense social concern” (156), the CMAA decided to take actions themselves before the government could institute their own regulatory standards.

After an examination of the comic book publishing landscape in the 1960s, which was in larger part informed by Seduction of the Innocent and shaped by the Comic Book Code of 1954, I then close the chapter by returning to an examination Wonder Woman, analyzing her treatment in comics the 1960s, and arguing that she embodies the paradox that frequently defined American womanhood during the decade.

Wonder Woman: From Warrior to Romantic

Since her debut in All Star Comics #8 (December 1941), Wonder Woman has become a popular culture icon. William Moulton Marston, who wrote under the pen name Charles Moulton, created Wonder Woman at a moment in history when America was at war, and when the country needed women to aid in the war efforts by leaving home and taking up work in factories. Marston imagined Wonder Woman as an example for young girls. She would in time become an archetype for the female superheroine, embodying many characteristics that countered traditional notions of womanhood. From the beginning, however, the character was a conflicted construction.
To begin, Wonder Woman is an Amazon. Per Greek myth, the Amazonians were a group of brutal, man-hating warriors descended from Ares, the god of war, who were so obsessed with efficiency in battle that they each cut off one of their breasts to enable them to better handle a bow and arrow. In his trade press book, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, Mike Madrid points to another of the most controversial aspects of the Amazonian culture: “Men were forbidden in the land of the Amazons, and the women warriors only mated once a year in order to continue their line, killing their male offspring and raising only girl children as ruthless fighters” (33). This particularly violent facet of Amazonian mythic law stands in stark contrast to the example for young women that Marston sought to create. Marston did not design his Amazonians after the violent Greek myths, choosing instead to imagine the Amazonians, and Wonder Woman herself, as symbols of peace.

Allowing Wonder Woman to be influenced, but not defined, by her violent mythological heritage, Marston believed his new character was exactly what the comic book industry needed in the 1940s. At that time, the industry was dominated by male superheroes, such as Batman, Superman, and Green Lantern, all figures who frequently achieved their goals through violent means. With Wonder Women, Marston wanted to not only offer a role model for young women, but also a character who did not always overcome obstacles through violence. Regarding Marston’s inspiration for the character, Madrid writes that the author wanted to create “a hero who would triumph using love rather than fisticuffs, and his wife Elizabeth suggested that he make the character a woman” (35).

It is important to note that Wonder Woman was not the only superheroine fighting the forces of evil in the 1940s. During the same period, Catwoman, Hawkgirl, and Mary Marvel, were, in their respective comics, also trying to reform the criminal element; these female
characters, however, were not granted the ability to move beyond the long shadows cast by their male counterparts, Batman, Hawkman, and Captain Marvel, respectively. Moreover, these other superheroines were not created, as Wonder Woman was, to exemplify “women’s ‘natural’ capacity for love, nurture, and self-sacrifice” which, according to Michelle Finn in *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times*, Marston believed “would make them better leaders than men” (7). In this regard, Marston’s believed that “comic books might have educational potential,” and that Wonder Woman could not only teach “young girl readers to stand up for themselves and achieve their true potential,” but might also lead all readers to imagine a more peaceful world (Madrid 35).

Madrid points out that Marston not only wanted to create a character who was ruled and driven by the power of love and peace, but also who was physically imposing, a character “with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman” (35). It was not enough for her to be able to stand a test of power amongst the likes of Batman and Superman; she also could not stray too far from edicts of female beauty of the time. It is in this double construction – the need to be both powerful and beautiful – that the conflicted nature of Wonder Woman is most evident.

To create this type of character – a beautiful mythological heroine who spoke to female readers, and a woman who sought to use peace and love instead of war to overcome obstacles – Marston altered the received Amazonian legend. These alterations become clear when tracing the origin story he crafted for the character, as well as subsequent narrative threads that defined her in the 1940s and 1950s. Before tracking those origins and threads, it is important to note that Wonder Woman’s story was not compiled in one comic book series and set forth in chronological order. Rather, it was revealed piecemeal, out of order, and over time through
several different titles. My reading of her performance of a particular kind of femininity that reflected postwar assumptions regarding gender looks to many comic books from this time that included her.

As noted above, Wonder Woman’s tale starts in All-Star Comics #8 (December, 1941). The book is a compilation, including stories about Batman, Superman, and the Justice Society of America. Tucked away in the issue is Wonder Woman’s first story. Significantly, however, it is not primarily a story of Wonder Woman’s history, but instead a story of an invasion of Wonder Woman’s world by the man who would, in subsequent stories, become her romantic interest, Steve Trevor. Thus, from the very beginning she was a character in a story centered on her love of a male protagonist.

The story begins with Trevor, a World War II intelligence officer for the United States Army, being shot down while pursuing Nazi spy, General Von Storm, “somewhere over the heart of the Bermuda Triangle” (Jimenez 408). As his plane sinks, an injured Trevor climbs atop one of the wings, where he falls into a coma. When an Amazonian princess, Diana, spies the comatose Trevor, she rescues him, taking him back to her private laboratory, located on Paradise Island, the secret home of the Amazonians. Marston makes her motivation for this act clear: Trevor is the first mortal man that Diana had seen, and she “fell in love with him at first sight” (Jimenez 408). During the course of the story that follows, two important pieces of information regarding the Amazonians are revealed: they value peace, and they are highly intelligent, capable of constructing complex pieces of technology, far more advanced that what was readily available in what Marston calls, “man’s world.” As an example of the latter, much of this original story involves Diana spending days working on a “Purple Healing Ray” which she then uses to bring Trevor back to life after he dies in her lab.
As the story pushes forward, and as Diana tends to Trevor, the spirits of Aphrodite and Athena appear to her mother, Queen Hippolyta, and inform her that Trevor must be returned to America.

**Aphrodite:** You must deliver him back to America—to help fight the forces of hate and oppression.

**Athena:** You must send with him your strongest and wisest Amazon—the finest of your Wonder Women! For America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women, needs your help! (Marston “Introducing…” 10)

As this initial story reaches its end, Diana, driven by the love for Trevor, enters the contest to decide who will return the pilot to his home, despite her mother’s protests.

**Diana:** But Mother, why can’t I enter into this tournament? Surely, I have as much right—

**Hippolyta:** No, Daughter, no! I forbid you to enter the contest! The winner must take this man back to American and never return, and I couldn’t bear to have you leave me forever! (Marston “Introducing…” 10)

Ignoring her mother’s command, Diana enters the contest, donning a mask and hiding her identity. She has no trouble besting the competition and, as her mother cannot deny the workings of fate, it is not long before Diana uses her invisible jet to return Trevor to Washington, DC, where the media is quick to name her “Wonder Woman.”

It is, of course, important to note that in this inaugural tale, Marston offers up a description of Wonder Woman that is empowering, making clear that she will aid in the fight against oppression and evil, albeit through peaceful means, and champion the cause of women. While this may have been the impetus for sending Wonder Woman to America, Marston
nonetheless creates a paradox in having Diana’s love for the “virile khaki-clad American, Steve” serve as her primary motivation to leave Paradise Island in the first place (43). Indeed, Marston’s final words in this first story, spoken by a narrator, illustrate that Diana is fueled by erotic desire, and not by duty: “And so Diana, the Wonder Woman, giving up her heritage, and her right to eternal life, leaves Paradise Island to take the man she loves back to America—the land she learns to love and adopt as her own!” (11).

After her debut, Wonder Woman’s adventures initially continued in *Sensation Comics* #1 (1942), and six months later Diana’s adventures were also being told in *Wonder Woman* (1944). Diana’s paradoxical performance is again clear as her stories begin in *Sensation*. Madrid claims that during this era Marston “peppered all of his Wonder Woman stories with a feminist sensibility” (42). However, as my reading of these issues will make clear, any performance of feminist sensibilities evident during this time was deeply compromised by Wonder Woman’s obsession for Trevor. To be sure, time and again, in the course of these initial stories, Wonder Woman’s power is either conceded to Trevor or not showcased at all. Instead, Marston portrays her as a woman who more interested in romance than the mission of peace, love, and education.

For example, in *Sensation Comics* #1 (1942), the story initially backtracks to Trevor’s death and resurrection in Diana’s lab on Paradise Island. As he awakens, he declares that his savior is a “beautiful angel,” a description Diana readily accepts: “He’s fainted! He’s still very weak. He called me an Angel—a beautiful angel! That’s the first time a man ever called me beautiful” (Marston “Wonder Woman Arrives” 4). Once the duo arrives in Washington, D.C., where Wonder Woman delivers Trevor to Walter Reed hospital, she spends the rest of her first day in America fighting criminals and thwarting an evil. And yet, throughout the day, she is
consumed by worry that she cannot be close to Trevor, at one point bemoaning,

“Steve…Steve…I’ve got to see him—be near him—but how?” (8).

As luck would have it, Wonder Woman’s question is answered when she spies a nurse sitting on the hospital steps. When asked what is wrong, the young woman weeps through a story:

**Nurse**: Today my fiancé just got a job in South America, but he can’t send for me because his salary is too small at the moment!

**Wonder Woman**: That’s terrible, and just think—it all would work out right if only you had a little money. (10)

Wonder Woman notices that she and the nurse look nearly identical. Seeing an opportunity, she offers to buy her doppelganger’s identity, stating: “Look—by taking your place I can see the man I love and you can marry the man you love! No harm done, for I’m a trained nurse, too—just a little money and a substitution” (10). The woman readily agrees to this strange proposal and, in another stroke of great fortune, it is revealed that both women are named Diana. With this transaction, Wonder Woman’s secret identity, “Diana Prince,” is born.

At the end of the issue, Diana is faced with another unforeseen obstacle. In the hospital, Trevor is clamoring on about a “beautiful angel” that saved him. Knowing the truth, Diana, presenting herself as a nurse, tries to comfort him.

**Diana**: All right I believe you! Anyway, Captain…you don’t need Wonder Woman now—you’ve got me!

**Steve**: Listen, Diana! You’re a nice kid, and I like you but if you think you can hold a candle to Wonder Woman you’re crazy! (Marston “Wonder Woman Arrives” 14)
The final panel of the issue showcases Wonder Woman musing about this unexpected and ironic development: “So I’m my own rival, eh? That’s funny. If mother could only see me now. As a very feminine woman . . . a nurse, no less. In a world full of men, and in love too—with myself for a rival!” (14).

The unethical nature of Wonder Woman’s identity-swapping actions aside, the story behind the birth of the “Diana Prince” alias brings with it at least two major issues that reveal prevailing patriarchal assumptions. First, there are the circumstances under which Wonder Woman’s secret identity was created. At the time of her debut, the secret identity convention had already been firmly established in comics that featured Batman and Superman. In these and all other cases, however, the concept of a superhero lying to a loved one through the adoption of a secret identity was done in the name of protecting loved ones, who might be harmed as the superhero pursued his mission. Wonder Woman, on the other hand, dons her secret identity, not to help strengthen her abilities or in service to her mission of serving society, but in the name of pursuing a romantic relationship. In fact, both Wonder Woman and the nurse in question are quite literally giving up their identities for the men that they love.

The second issue concerning Wonder Woman’s secret identity is that Marston was pitting two women against each other: Diana and Wonder Woman. While both identities belong to the same woman (Wonder Women and Diana Prince are, after all, the same), in suggesting that the two identities are rivals, Marston rehashes a common narrative of having women fight over the love of a man. In so doing, a great deal of power is ascribed to Trevor. The misogyny that underpins this narrative trope is addressed in *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do about It*, where Joan Williams suggest that when women are set against each other, or in this case cast as rivals, it “protects men’s privileged access to power” (241). By
stating that Wonder Woman and Diana are rivals, Marston makes it clear that Trevor will have two women vying for his affections, publicly and privately, thus reinscribing his patriarchal role as the powerful center of this love triangle, free to take his pick of the two warring women. Of course, this power could be contested if Diana resorted to telling Trevor the truth about her identity. However, her understanding of love, as controlled by Marston, does not allow for such honesty.

This is not to say that there was not what might be considered a feminist message in these early Wonder Woman stories (albeit one that was compromised). This message, though subtle, became more pronounced following her six-month run in *Sensation Comics*, when Wonder Woman was given her own, self-titled, ongoing series. For example, at the end of *Wonder Woman* issue # 5 (1942), the heroine proudly proclaims, “Earth girls can stop men’s power for evil when they refuse to be dominated by evil men!” (Marble 46). Sentiments such as this demonstrate the presence of feminist impulses; unfortunately, such impulses were few and far in-between, and contradicted within the stories themselves. Five issues after Diana’s proclamation concerning the power of Earth girls, Trevor levels blatantly misogynistic disapproval at Wonder Woman’s role in the world in issue #10:

**Steve:** Blistering Blazes! Why will that beautiful gal always invite trouble? If she’d only married me, she’d be home cooking my dinner right now” (Marston “Spies from Saturn” 15).

Once again, Marston’s narrative places Wonder Woman in paradoxical position. The first page of the issue reminds readers that Wonder Woman is as “beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules and swifter than Mercury,” but this impossibly powerful superwoman is rendered weak by her love for a man who would rather she stay home and cook a meal for him.
When Wonder Woman was given a self-titled, ongoing series in 1942, Marston took the opportunity afforded by more pages and a higher profile presence to not only expand, but retool the history of the Amazonians. As were his earliest manifestations of Wonder Woman, Marston’s reimagining of the mythic civilization in the new series was also rife with paradox. This new mythology was first revealed in Wonder Woman #1 (1942). The changes that Marston made to the Amazonians in this initial self-titled issue focused more on the mythology that underpinned the all-female society, and the drive that the Amazonians had to overthrow the patriarchy. And yet, as I will make clear, those efforts were also sometimes paradoxical.

The issue opens with the god Ares declaring that the world needs to be ruled by the violence and power of man, a decision that will have woman subjected to the whim and will of patriarchy. Ares’ decision is contested by the goddess of love, Aphrodite, who believes that the world should instead be ruled with love and kindness. While Ares and his male soldiers seek to enslave women, Aphrodite uses magic to create the Amazonian race, which will in turn overthrow Ares. From this point forward, the notion that Amazonians must teach ignorant men of love is a mainstay in the Wonder Woman narrative. So too is the celebration of community and solidarity amongst the Amazonian women. These competing forces led Marston to further redefine the conception of the mythical race of warrior women to no longer include weapons or armor. Instead, they were adorned in little more than sandals and chitons. In light of this reimagined myth, once Aphrodite realizes in the first issue that the Amazonians could be easily bested by the men, the goddess bestows upon Hippolyta a magical girdle. The goddess of love explains that though the girdle does not have any offensive power, it nonetheless will make the entire Amazonian civilization unstoppable. Recognizing that this power is formidable, Ares devises a plan to steal it – he sends Hercules to infiltrate the Amazon community, and,
subsequently, Hercules uses his demigod powers of seduction to woo Hippolyta and steal the magical girdle. With the girdle now in his possession, Ares is able to capture and enslave the Amazonians. Hippolyta, the queen who Marston renders as susceptible to the romantic charms of Hercules, cries out to Aphrodite and asks for help. The goddess, unable to watch her children suffer, gives the Amazonians the power they need to defeat Ares and his army and escape to an island paradise where they will be safe.

Aphrodite’s tropical paradise comes with two very significant rules. First, because of the violence men have wrought, they are never to set foot on Paradise Island. If a man does end up on the island, he is to be executed, immediately. Second, as a reminder of the horror that was visited upon them by the Greeks, all Amazonians must wear wrist-binding manacles, thus carrying with them a permanent reminder of what happens when women submit to patriarchal rule. With this expanded history in place, Marston closes issue #1 with the creation of Hippolyta’s daughter, Diana. Within the safety of the secret island, the gods teach Hippolyta to make a child out of clay. Once her creation is completed, Aphrodite breathes life into it, and Diana is born. As rendered by Marston, Diana is powerful, strong, beautiful, and eternally young, thanks to a fountain of youth that preserves her radiance.

From the retooled history of the Amazonians, to the fantastical way in which Diana came into the world, “Wonder Woman’s birth show[s] the effort made to appeal to young female readers with a taste for magical, escapist fantasies, while also creating a world where women could live unhampered by the brutish, small-minded ways of men” (Madrid 37). Marston’s intentions, at least as they are documented, reveal that he wanted to create a character that young women could identify with; at the same time, as I have sought to demonstrate, the comic’s author could not wholly escape the biases of the patriarchal culture of 1940s America, and these
influences are clearly reflected in Wonder Woman’s stories. It is important to note, however, that these messages, including but not limited to doctrines of domesticity, traditional family structures, and gender norms, not only found their way into the stories of Wonder Woman, but also into the stories of other powerful female characters in popular comics of the time.

For example, Lois Lane, introduced into the Superman universe in 1938, is a smart, determined woman who takes up residence in a place of power, the news offices of Metropolis’ preeminent media outlet, The Daily Planet, where she is one of the paper’s most decorated reporters. During the early years of the comic, however, her power is time and again compromised when she is forced to consistently rely on Superman to save her from certain death. Moreover, like Wonder Woman, Lois is also preoccupied with romantic pursuits. When she is not stumbling into one spot of danger or another, she is busy trying to pursue Superman romantically. For instance, in Action Comics #252 (1959), when Lois Lane is saved from the mob by John Corben, who is later revealed to be the villainous Metallo, the Metal Man, she declares:

Lois: Don’t bother to cover up the bullet holes in your suit, darling! You’re Superman, the man I love! And stupid me… I was brushing you off! I’ll make it up to you from now on. (Berstein 9)

In her trade press book Examining Lois Lane: The Scoop on Superman’s Sweetheart, Nadine Farghaly expresses a commonly-held point of view on the character, labelling Lois a “feminist icon” (18). A close reading of the comics from the 1940s and 1950s, however, reveals that the Lois is anything but, as she is primarily motivated by the aggressive pursuit of a romantic relationship with Superman. Like Wonder Woman in her post-war years, Lois frequently allows her power and agency to take a backseat to her romantic impulses.
Hippolyta, one of the most important characters in the Wonder Woman mythos, is similarly bound by her connections to men in Marston’s retooled and expanded narrative of the Amazonians. This is abundantly clear as she risks the safety of her community for Hercules’ lusty advances and suffers the Greeks’ subsequent enslavement and assault of her people, but equally telling is the fact that the punishment handed down by Aphrodite is the banishment of men. This act suggests that such measures are necessary because the Amazonian women cannot be trusted to make wise decisions where men were concerned. Finally, as if the Amazonians have not been through enough, they are forced to wear manacles; though these bindings eventually came to be referred to simply as “bracelets,” it is significant that Marston originally termed them “the Bracelets of Submission.” In sum, then, I believe that Marston’s retooling of the Amazonian’s narrative is every bit as fraught and complex as his conceptualization of the Wonder Woman character, his questionable methods noticeably complicating the message of female power he professed.

In an article entitled, “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” published in 1943, Marston pointed to the difference between male and female heroes:

Suppose your child’s ideal becomes a superman who uses his extraordinary power to help the weak. [. . .] It’s smart to be strong. It’s big to be generous. But it’s sissified, according to exclusively masculine roles, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. “Aw, that’s for girls!” snorts our young comics reader. “Who wants to be a girl?” And that’s the point; not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power. (42)

While Marston’s message of female empowerment is laudable, as the examples I have provided in this section make clear, it must be read with some skepticism. To be sure, while Wonder
Woman’s creation, her mission, and the mythos from which her adventures emerge reveal that Marston sought to create a powerful woman who would not bend to the will of men, time and again his heroine is shown giving up power and agency. Likewise, the civilization of which she is apart, the Amazonians, are rendered as simultaneously powerful and disempowered. As I will argue in the next section, these paradoxical assumptions at play in Wonder Woman comics of the 1940s and 1950s correspond with the paradoxical gender norms and expectations of the post-World War II era.

**Gender Roles and Expectations**

An understanding of any given era’s predominant social and political messages concerning sexuality, gender relations, and equality can go a long way in helping scholars to appreciate why culture makers – including those who create comics – interact with the world, popular culture, and performance in the ways that they do. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is an invaluable text due to its commentary on the roles of American women in the workplace and the home during the 1950s and early 1960s. Friedan posits that in the years immediately following World War II, fresh off their positive and liberating experiences in joining the American workforce, many women began to realize that the fantasy of domesticity was not wholly fulfilling. Friedan drew her conclusions from interviews she conducted with a number of women, all of whom had returned to the traditional roles of mothers and housewives as their primary occupations following the war. While the book was not meant to be read as a diatribe against marriage and motherhood at large, Friedan brought to light the women’s general dissatisfaction with the choices they made, the opportunities (or lack thereof) that they were offered, and the visions they had of the future. One of her interview subjects, a twenty-three-
year-old mother, offers a poignant remark on the depth of the dissatisfaction affecting many women:

I ask myself why I’m so dissatisfied. I’ve got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer. He doesn’t have any of these feelings. He says maybe I need a vacation, let’s go to New York for a weekend. But that isn’t it. I always had this idea we should do everything together. I can’t sit down and read a book alone. If the children are napping and I have one hour to myself I just walk through the house waiting for them to wake up. I don’t make a move until I know where the rest of the crowd is going. It’s as if ever since you were a little girl, there’s always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to. (15)

As this young mother demonstrates, many women in post-war America were growing dissatisfied with the traditional social expectation that they would confine themselves to the home and center their lives on the needs of their husbands and children. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the nuclear family, with the mother and wife keeping the home fires burning, stood as a symbol of hope and safety in the face of an uncertain future. Even so, for Friedan, her interviewees, and many other American women of the 1950s and 60s, this model of security was stifling, rather than liberating. It is important to note that many American women had begun questioning traditional gender roles and expectations long before the 1950s and 1960s; however, this era saw an increasing number of activists, organizations, and movements advocating for an expanded view of women’s potential outside of the home. With the publication
of books like *The Feminine Mystique*, the world was allowed further insight into the disparity between the fantasies spun by and for American women and their reality.

During the 1950s and 1960s the notion that traditional women’s roles were “natural” was frequently reinforced by popular media, which consistently offered messages encouraging women to keep their energies focused on the creation and maintenance of the home. Friedan recounts remarks she heard while interviewing editors of women’s magazines in the 1960s:

> Our readers are housewives, full time. They’re not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home. They aren’t interested in politics, unless it’s related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee. Humor? Has to be gentle, they don’t get satire. Travel? We have almost completely dropped it. Education? That’s a problem. Their own education level is going up. They’ve generally all had a high-school education and many, college. They’re tremendously interested in education for their children—fourth-grade arithmetic. You just can’t write about ideas or broad issues of the day for women. That’s why we’re publishing 90 per cent service now and 10 per cent general interest. (27)

Friedan observed that the belief that women should be restricted to narrow, predetermined roles recalled the German phrase, “‘Kinder, Kuche, Kirche,’ the slogan by which the Nazis decreed that women must once again be confined to their biological role” (85). In sum, according to Frieden, while American women of the 1950s and early 1960s were frequently perceived as having few interests outside the home, many were harboring a growing sense of discontent. In the process of exposing the oppressive gender norms and expectations of the post-war era,
Friedan highlights the paradoxical placement of women in American society that is mirrored in the Wonder Woman comics.

While America was being invited into Friedan’s investigation into American domesticity, Eleanor Roosevelt was fighting to right another social wrong during the 1960s: compensation inequality in the work place. In 1961, at the behest of the former First Lady, an outspoken civil rights activist, President John F. Kennedy created the President’s Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW). The commission, administered by the Labor Department, created proposals that were designed to address “sexual discrimination in government and private employment and to recommend services that would enable women to contribute economically to society” (Baugess 524). When the findings of the PCSW were released in 1963 the study showed that, even within the federal government, women consistently made less than men (524). Whereas the number of women in the workplace was small compared to the number of women who worked at home, Roosevelt’s efforts demonstrate that there was foundational work being done in the name of equality for those women who by choice or necessity labored outside of the home, and the significance of her work is undeniable today, as women continue to fight for equal pay, over fifty years later.

Looking at both Friedan and the PCSW offers a more complete picture of the status of women and the way that womanhood was being performed in post-war America. On the one hand, as indicated by Friedan’s study, there were many women who were staying at home, either happily or unhappily so; on the other, as indicated by PCSW findings, those women who were still finding employment outside of the home were getting paid less than their male counterparts. The issue is not that the women in post-World War II America were not present in predominantly patriarchal arenas of power, but that they were undervalued and disempowered
within those arenas. Similarly, the character of Wonder Woman had her own comic book in a market saturated by male heroes, but the sole fact of her presence in the market was not in itself a wholly empowering phenomenon. In my study, I seek to examine the oppressive forces at play during this era and the ones that follow – forces which led a fictional Wonder Woman to bend to the whims of Steve Trevor, while real-life women in the workplace struggled, and too often failed, to earn equal pay for equal work.

Witches and Genies

The simultaneous presence and absence of fictionalized, fantastical women was not confined to comic book pages alone in the 1960s; the performance of the paradoxically empowered and disempowered female figure also showed up in popular television shows like *Bewitched* (ABC 1964-72) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC 1965-70). While other shows premiering in 1964, such as the *Addams Family* and the *Munsters*, had fantastical premises and female characters, *Bewitched* was the only show debuting that year in which the heroine was the sole super empowered character. Like Wonder Woman in the 1940s, Samantha Stephens (played by Elizabeth Montgomery) has incredible powers; with a waggle of her nose, she can complete chores, make a small boy an all-star athlete, or turn someone into a dog. Also like Wonder Woman, Sam is romantically bound to a man who often fears and resents her power; Sam’s husband Darrin (played by Dick York in seasons 1-5 and Dick Sargent in seasons 6-8) is generally against the use of magic in the series unless it benefits him.

While I enjoyed the episodes of the show I watched in reruns as a child, a more nuanced critique of the performances on *Bewitched* reveals many of the same paradoxical positionings that plagued Wonder Woman’s 1940s narrative. *Bewitched* is a sitcom about a mixed marriage where the stay-at-home mother and wife is forced to deal with her husband’s endangered sense
of masculinity, or agency, in the face of her supernatural powers. In her efforts to coexist peacefully with Darrin, Samantha frequently resorts to tactics of dishonesty and coercion, but her methods are written in such a way as to elicit empathy; she often has no other choice in the matter. Her abilities, which she did not reveal to her husband until they were on their honeymoon, are placed under a gag order, by Darrin, in the name of her own protection, but this edict is one she fights against. In his book, *Bewitched*, Walter Metz speaks to Sam’s struggle to reconcile her desire to please Darrin with her distaste for the tedium of mortal, non-magical life:

> In the show, Samantha demonstrates significant discontent with the domestic role she is assigned, not in her outward dialogue, but in her actions. For despite her promises to abstain from witchcraft, she often “twitches” to do housework rather than doing it the “mortal” way (i.e., the way all American housekeepers, who happen to mostly be women, are forced to, through tedious labor). Yet nearly every episode ends with Samantha endorsing Darrin’s patriarchal dominance as appropriate for her. (92)

As did many women of her day, Samantha was dissatisfied with her socially-prescribed duties as a housewife, but she found it necessary to perform contentment in order to keep the peace at home. *Bewitched* suggested that this type of subterfuge was not only necessary but also strategically preferable to an outright refusal to conform to her husband’s expectations. For its day, Samantha’s representation of gender was enlightened in that she subverted the rules imposed on her by her husband, but that same representation was woefully traditionalist in that her plights and obstacles all revolved, in some way, around Darrin’s character.

Samantha’s mother, Endora (played by Agnes Moorehead), presents more challenges to the notion of *Bewitched* as site of empowering performances. It is easy to look at Endora as a
fun, mischievous character designed to create laughable conflict on the show. But beneath Endora’s comic exterior lies the primary essence of her character as both a mother and a saboteur, whose schemes and machinations are meant to damage – or even destroy – her daughter’s marriage. In Bewitched Forever: The Immortal Companion to Television’s Most Magical Supernatural Situation Comedy, Herbie Pilato offers up an explanation of why Endora was important to the show: “She was Everyman’s mother-in-law…. Every man in the world had a certain mother-in-law image in his mind, and where Samantha is concerned Endora came with the marriage. It was a package deal” (58). Within the world of the sitcom, where mischievous characters are more often playfully bad than they are pure evil, Pilato’s assessment of the primarily comic nature of the role is, to a certain degree, apt. But on a show that revolves, whether intentionally or otherwise, around a narrative of patriarchal dominance, the relationship between Endora and Samantha is itself paradoxical and somewhat troubling. Admittedly, Endora served a practical purpose on the show as Samantha and Darin’s antagonist, and Bewitched’s writers were not attempting to create a show about sisterhood, mother-daughter support, or community between two powerful witches. Regardless, while making a television show in which a sometimes dim-witted mortal is caught between his well-intentioned wife and mischievous mother-in-law, the writers missed many valuable opportunities to include scenes of solidarity between the two women. As was the case with Wonder Woman, Lois Lane, and others, Endora’s presence and power were undermined by her relative lack of agency and her determination to challenge her daughter at every turn. A prime example of this shortcoming occurs in the first season of the series, during Episode Four, entitled “Mother Meets What’s His Name” (1964). Annoyed by the fact that some nosy “concerned” mothers in the neighborhood are attempting to investigate the strange goings-on at the Stephen’s residence, Endora ties up their children and
holds them hostage in an upstairs bedroom. While Endora is ostensibly working to protect Samantha from being discovered as a witch, the extremity of her actions jeopardizes her daughter’s place within the community. Her ludicrous response to Darrin’s questioning a bit later is no more helpful; while it is hilarious that her first impulse is to turn her son-in-law into an artichoke, the action further demonstrates her lack of concern for Sam’s overall well-being. This plotline is typical of the series; time and again, when presented with opportunities to showcase unity between its leading female characters, the makers of Bewitched chose a different path.

Only a year after the premiere of ABC’s Bewitched, “One of the most adored, imaginative situation comedies from the 1960s” (Hill 13), the show spawned a unique imitation. In 1965, NBC uncorked another supernatural sitcom, I Dream of Jeannie. The premise of Jeannie was not wholly different from the premise of Bewitched: a handsome man shares adventures with a young woman with superpowers, and hijinks ensue. Two important differences stand out, however, and both are highly revelatory of the paradoxical ways in which supposedly empowered women were performed onscreen in the 1960s.

First is the issue of the relationship between astronaut Tony Nelson (played by Larry Hagman) and Jeannie (played by Barbara Eden). During the pilot episode of I Dream of Jeannie, “The Lady in the Bottle” (1965), Air Force captain Tony Nelson’s space capsule, Stardust One, crashes on a deserted island in the South Pacific. Nelson notices a strange bottle on the beach, uncorks it, rubs it, and Jeannie, the genie, appears. Nelson is, of course, taken aback when the beautiful woman kisses him; Jeannie’s enthusiasm is due in no small part to the fact that she has been trapped for two thousand years, and she eagerly pledges her allegiance to Nelson and begins calling him “Master.” Against the backdrop of the budding women’s movement of the 1960s, this unfortunate word choice seems woefully ignorant, if not willfully aggressive and
reactionary. Perhaps the appellation of “Master” would not seem so odd if it had been used once in the pilot and then dropped, but the term was used consistently throughout the show’s run and served to define the terms of the relationship between the main characters. Jeannie does everything in service to the manager of her independence, and Nelson would often call out “‘Back in your bottle’…when Jeannie’s presence inconvenienced him” (Hamamoto 64).

This troublesome master/slave relationship – and indeed, even the very fact of Jeannie’s existence – often proved to be an inconvenience for Nelson in the series. For example, in Season 4, episode 15, entitled “Ride ‘Em, Astronaut” (1969), Jeannie goes grocery shopping for her Master and inadvertently becomes the one-millionth customer at Food City. This honor brings with it the title of “Queen of the Supermarket,” and soon the semi-liberated genie is also named “Queen of the Cocoa Beach Rodeo.” The prize value of the latter is questionable, however. As “Queen,” Jeannie is, herself, to be the prize for the winner of the rodeo, who would win the honor of a date with her. Aside from rendering the already-enslaved Jeannie as chattel once more, this “honor” brings with it another serious risk – if Jeannie goes out on a date with someone, her secret could get out. Fear of losing Jeannie leads Nelson to enter the competition as The Pinto Kid, but this choice has less to do with affection than with a desire to maintain his authority as her sole Master. This particular narrative, not the only one of its kind in the series, showcases Jeannie as an object of male desire, and something over which men compete. As the shenanigans of the episode ended, with the threat of exposure defused, Nelson’s role as master and Jeannie’s role as slave are both reestablished. In his book, Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology, Darrell Hamamoto highlights Nelson’s behavior in the aftermath of these events, and by doing so gives an insightful glimpse into the nature of Jeannie’s and Nelson’s relationship.
The major claimed his prize by begrudgingly taking her [Jeannie] out on a dinner date. Major Nelson had blamed Jeannie for having put him through so much torture, even though she had never in the first place consented of her own free will to serve as the rodeo prize. (64)

By the end of the episode, Nelson once again makes it clear that he is annoyed with Jeannie’s exploits, even though the predicament was entirely beyond her control. As is often the case on both *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*, the very presence of the powerful female character is rendered as little more than an inconvenience for the male lead.

Both shows stand apart from many other representations of women that ruled the 1960s in that they prominently feature powerful female characters who are, at least outwardly, far less passive than the likes of *Leave it to Beaver’s* June Cleaver. A close reading of the performances on these programs demonstrates, however, that any agency Samantha and Jeannie had was contingent, that they strove to mute their own powers at the behest of their controlling husbands, and that female characters occupying the same spaces on these shows were more inclined to tear each other down than to build one another up. More often than not, these shows reinforced traditional gender norms wrapped in thin layer of feminist ideals, much like the Wonder Woman comics of the 1940s and 50s.

**Revisiting Wonder Woman**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the implementation of the Comics Code, the post-*Seduction of the Innocent* set of rules designed to dismantle violent storylines in comic books, brought about a change in DC editorial policy in the 1950s. DC’s new, official policy stated that “the inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance, and should be drawn realistically, without
exaggeration of feminine physical qualities” (qtd in Reisz 12). When taking into consideration
the shifts that were implemented by the DC editorial team because of the Comics Code, it is no
surprise that Wonder Woman’s adventures leading up to the sixties found her fighting for both
justice and a place on Steve Trevor’s arm. Though there were some changes made to Wonder
Woman during the 1960s, the paradoxical treatment continued to define the character throughout
that decade.

In this final section of this chapter, I will first look to comic book writer and editor
Robert Kanigher’s control of Wonder Woman from 1959-1968 and argue that his disinterest and
clumsy handling of the heroine’s performances led to his infantilizing of the character, a move
used to mute Wonder Woman’s power. Following this, I will turn my attention to the efforts of
writer Dennis O’Neil and artist Mike Sekowsky, who took control of Wonder Woman from
Woman, reinforce her paradoxical presence in the comic book by stripping her of both her
identity as superhero and her power as an Amazonian, instead making her relationship with
Trevor the primary focus. Examining how the character was treated throughout the decade of the
1960s, I argue that Wonder Woman, while powerful, was often handled irresponsibly and
repeatedly placed in a paradoxical position akin to the other figures I have discussed.

In 1959 Robert Kanigher, who had taken over writing on Wonder Woman after Marston
passed away in 1947 sought to bring Wonder Woman into the 1960s by altering some important
elements of her past. While both Marston and Kanigher consistently told stories that included the
attempted domestication of Diana, Kanigher was less interested in messages of female
empowerment and gender equality than was his predecessor, and his focus before the sixties
veered towards romance. Kanigher’s efforts to distance Diana from Marston’s original concept
are evident in *Wonder Woman* #105 (1959). The issue, the cover of which promised the “Never Before Revealed” secret origin of Wonder Woman, opens on the royal chamber of Amazon queen Hippolyta, who was tending to her infant child, Diana. Soon thereafter, she is visited by the goddesses Aphrodite and Athena, who both bestow powers on Diana.

**Aphrodite:** I bequeath to you, Princess Diana, all the beauty of goodness! So that you may be one of the fairest of maids throughout the world!

**Athena:** I bequeath to you, Princess Diana, all the wisdom of the planets!

(Kanigher “The Eagle” 3)

The women are interrupted by Mercury and Hercules, who complain that they were not invited to participate in the bestowing of gifts; the latter asks, “Did you think I would allow any female to outdo me in gifts?” (4). Not to be outdone by their female counterparts, the male deities impulsively decide to also bestow gifts on the newborn, but do so in ways aimed at testing her worthiness. When Mercury drops his metal helmet over Diana’s crib, she catches it:

**Mercury:** By Jove’s Thunderbolt—did you see the speed with which she caught my helmet? I bequeath to her even greater speed than I myself possess!

And after Diana reaches up and yanks on Hercules’ curly beard:

**Hercules:** Tweaked my beard, did she? As if I were a mere mortal! Aye, Princess Diana—Aye—what better gift can I deed you—than strength even greater than mine! (Kanigher “The Eagle” 4)

This change in Diana’s obtaining of her powers accounts for the first significant deviation from Marston’s vision of Wonder Woman. Marston’s 1940s Wonder Woman was one member of a community of powerful Amazonians. What made Diana unique during the Marston era was not her power – because all Amazonians were empowered – but the proficiency with which she used
her abilities. In Marston’s version, Diana was never portrayed as better than her Amazonian sisters, just remarkably skilled. Conversely, in making Diana stand apart from her kin, Kanigher obscures the messages of sisterhood and community that could be found in Marston’s origin story. Furthermore, in Kanigher’s version, Diana is granted her physical powers only after impressing two male deities, playing fully into traditional gender stereotypes alongside the goddesses’ gifts of beauty and wisdom. Finally, Kanigher’s inclusion of Hercules in his comics carries with it a dark backstory. According to Greek myth, Hercules killed Hippolyta while fulfilling his twelve trials; granting him a key role in Diana’s origin story undermines her gift of superhuman strength, as she owes it entirely to a man who symbolizes violent patriarchy and was, in another mythos, her own mother’s murderer.

Two panels later, the story has progressed several years, and the Amazonians are receiving the news that all of their men were killed “in the wars” (Kanigher “The Eagle” 4). This moment signals a second significant change in Kanigher’s take on Wonder Woman: the addition of Amazonian men. For Kanigher, the patriarchy was a very important part of the Wonder Woman mythos. While Marston’s Amazonians had been based on mythical women warriors, so consumed with efficiency in battle that they mutilated their bodies and mated only once a year for the sole purpose of continuing their line, Kanigher’s Amazonians stay away from the battlefields, tending to their homes while their men go to war. This is a far cry from the Marston era Amazonians of the 1940s who forbade men from living among them. The final change to Marston’s Wonder Woman mythos came from Kanigher making the Amazon women fearful and weak. The death of the Amazon men found Diana and the other Amazon women lost and afraid of what would happen, should they be caught up in the war that took their men from them. Hippolyta called the Amazonians together and informed them that they were going to build a
boat to travel far from the wars that killed their men. Once they arrived at what they would call Paradise Island, Athena appeared to tell them that they could have eternal youth and beauty so long as they never left the island.

During the Kanigher’s *Wonder Woman* run, his primary objective seems to have been domesticating Diana. By altering her origin story, Kanigher effectively erased her past and imbued her history with his own brand of patriarchal domination. Were his changes a reaction against the rise of feminism? Were the social and political stresses of the time affecting the writer? In their article, “The Effect of Wives’ Employment on the Mental Health of Married Men and Women,” Ronald Kessler and James McRae state that the rise of the empowered woman in the 1960s also gave rise to emotional and mental health issues among men. They argue that, “it is conceivable that…role changes [had] led to convergence not only by improving women's mental health but also by increasing distress among men” (Kessler 216). While there is no definitive evidence to prove that Kanigher was feeling a particular pressure brought on by the changing role that women were seeing in the workplace, I do suggest that disdain for the women’s liberation movements were a part of the larger cultural moment in the 1960s, and that Kanigher’s lackadaisical approach to the Amazonian character was affected by that cultural moment.

By 1961, Kanigher was no longer interested in telling standalone Wonder Woman stories. Encouraged by the success of Superboy (stories of a young Superman) he decided instead to create a pubescent version of the character named Wonder Girl, whose stories appeared alongside Wonder Woman’s within the comics until 1966. The adventures of Wonder Girl significantly altered Marston’s history of the heroine, and the stories were particularly troubling in their infantilizing of Wonder Woman. In her essay “Separating the Woman from the Girl: Reconfigurations of the Feminine in British Contemporary Drama,” Vicky Ball suggests that the
“infantilization of...women diffuse[s] any potential threat they pose to male patriarchal power” (165). Applying Ball’s ideas to the subject of my study, it is possible that making Wonder Girl an important part of the Wonder Woman narrative was in fact a way to subjugate Diana, as character, within both her fictional world and the real world. Throughout much of the 1960s, Wonder Woman and Wonder Girl muddled through ridiculous storylines, and the former moved ever further away from fulfilling her role as the ambassador of peace as Marston intended.

Kanigher’s obsession with reverse-aging the heroine continued to an absurd and troubling extreme in Wonder Woman #122 (1961). In this issue, Wonder Woman is, without her consent of course, strapped to an “age clock” which goes backwards, thus turning her into Wonder Tot. Wonder Tot, an infant in a one-piece Wonder Woman bathing suit, must then dodge bolts of lightning while trying to stop a “skyscraper” sized Wonder Woman monster.

By the time Kanigher was replaced as editor and writer of Wonder Woman in 1968, the feminist movement was stepping into its second wave, heralded by a *New York Times Magazine* article entitled “Second Feminist Wave.” In the article writer Martha Lear christened the term Second Wave Feminism, a name that connected the women’s movement to the previous movement and it’s fight for woman’s rights, particularly the suffrage movement (Rosen 1941). At the time of Kanigher’s departure, feminists, and their fight against the patriarchy, were looking forward, with their rebellious spirits, to a new era of women’s liberation. They were not interested in going backwards, as Kanigher was with Diana’s stories, and perhaps that is the reason that a new creative team needed to be brought together to take over the crafting of Diana’s narratives.

The new creative team was put under the control of writer Denny O’Neil and artist Mike Sekowsky. While the new creative team was ready to jettison stories from the past, they had little
interest in doing more than turning Wonder Woman into a powerless socialite. This further
disempowering of Wonder Woman began gradually, with a makeover designed to bring her into
the world of the 1960s. The changes that Sekowsky and O’Neil instituted began in 1968 with
Wonder Woman #178, an issue that announced, “Forget the old. The NEW Wonder Woman is
here!” The cover showcased Diana Prince, in a bold colorblock tunic, leather pants, heavy eye
makeup, and a bouffant hairstyle, standing next to a poster featuring a double image of herself.
On the left side of the poster, she wears her traditional Wonder Woman costume, and on the
right, she wears the conservative civilian attire that was Diana Prince’s signature style in the
previous decade – a modest blue skirt suit and glasses, her hairstyle simple and straight. The
poster is defaced with a large blue X, and the “new” Diana Prince is still holding the bucket of
paint. With this, the creators were not only shunning her previously-established image but also
suggesting that Wonder Woman would be taking charge and rebranding herself. Sadly though,
while the image on the cover tells of self-empowerment reclaimed, the story within is a familiar
tale of Wonder Woman, once again, binding her power to Steve Trevor.

The story begins with Wonder Woman (notably not in her civilian identity as Diana) and
Trevor at a party, encountering a man named Alex Block. Block insults Wonder Woman, and he
goes so far as to wrap his arms around her and suggest that, even though she’s a “freak,” he
would still like to have a good time with her. While Trevor does take issue with the other man’s
flirting, it is not until this physical harassment that he steps in and punches Brock in the face.
Later that evening, when Trevor and Wonder Woman are parked and kissing, he is still enraged,
claiming “Block is a rat.” Wonder Woman responds that, in the future, Trevor should not get so
upset, and she goes on to downplay the acts of verbal and physical aggression that were leveled
at her. After dropping Wonder Woman off at home, Trevor goes out to a club called the
Tangerine Trolley, where he flirts with another woman, who is clearly chemically compromised. After telling her that he is feeling “kinda up-tight” himself, Trevor suggests that they have a drink and “loosen up” together (O’Neil “Rival” 5). The story is one that is familiar: while the woman, in this case Wonder Woman, is devoted solely to her man, in this case Trevor, he is clearly not exclusively committed to her.

Later that night, as the story unfolds, Block is found dead. Trevor is arrested for the murder and goes to trial immediately, facing a death sentence if he is found guilty. Wonder Woman takes the stand, and the prosecutor asks her about Trevor’s last words before the two of them parted during the night in question. Wonder Woman, emotionally shaken by the line of questioning, responds to the prosecutor by stuttering, “H-He said Alex w-was a rat…who didn’t deserve to live” (O’Neil “Rival” 7). On the page, the confession is bolded, highlighting the gravity of her words. Although Trevor did refer to Block as a rat, he never actually stated that Block deserved to die. This provides the reader with one of two options for assessing Wonder Woman’s integrity: either Wonder Woman is a liar, or she is forgetful. Both possibilities cast an unfavorable light on her and on her emotional testimony, effectively invalidating the prosecutor’s observations regarding her power. Thus, while Wonder Woman is regarded as a commanding presence in the world she inhabits, in the moment that a man presses her with questions in a courtroom, she breaks down and is relegated to the role of clichéd, emotional, unreliable woman.

The dialogue that follows only furthers the dismantling of Wonder Woman’s character:

**Member of the crowd:** Wow! Wonder Woman sure nailed her boyfriend with that bit of evidence.

**Wonder Woman:** Oh, Steve, darling—I’m sorry—but I had to tell the truth.
Steve Trevor: Congratulations! Once again you’ve brought a dangerous criminal to justice! (O’Neil “Rival” 7)

Though Wonder Woman’s dishonesty or forgetfulness on the stand is not exposed, her image is tarnished as she is cast not only as weak and emotional, but also as traitorous to the supposed love of her life. The next panel, labeled, “Later alone in her misery,” shows the powerful Amazonian warrior crying and thinking, “…Alex Block was right…I’m not a woman, but a freak who will send her own beloved to his death” (O’Neil “Rival” 8). While Wonder Woman’s strength is publicly acknowledged in this issue, the storyline to this point also depicts her as paradoxically weak, remarkably emotional, and almost unstable, unable to dispatch a flirtatious civilian man or to clear her lover’s name when his life is on the line. As in Bewitched and Jeannie, the heroine, despite her supernatural abilities, is still bound and largely defined by traditional gender roles. Just as Jeannie and Samantha were bound to their male counterparts despite the men’s often offensive actions, the writers of Wonder Woman kept Diana bound to Trevor, despite the way he behaved.

As the story in the issue progresses, Diana decides that she needs to investigate the whereabouts of the young woman that Trevor had been spending time with on the night of Block’s murder. To do this, Diana must go undercover, but she realizes quickly that her looks are not acceptable – a twist that provides the rationale for her updated style.

Diana: But looking the way I do I’d stick out like a sore thumb with that crowd at the hippie club! So—I’ve got to look the part! (O’Neil “Rival” 11).

Diana goes through a change, highlighted by a visual montage that shows her in various fashions from the 1960s. When she is done, a smile spread across her face, and she proclaims, “Wow! I—I’m gorgeous! I should have done this ages ago!” (O’Neil “Rival” 11). Finally, a moment of
triumph for the frustrated Diana, though her win column for this issue now consists of only one fashion-related victory. The next scene finds Diana in the Tangerine Trolley, looking for the mysterious woman who might offer Trevor an alibi. Her transformation has somehow brought about not only a visual change, but an immediate change in attitude and language as she verbally rejects the advances of an older club-goer, stating, “You’re not my bag, pops…my party is a no-name chick…” (12). Here Diana uses contemporary jargon that demonstrates her complete integration into a social group, where she is pleased by the way that she is gazed upon and lusted after. As she suggests later in the issue, “Ha! The new me really turns ‘em on!” (13). While the “new Diana” demonstrates a newfound ability to quickly deflect the unsolicited advances of a man in a club (it is too bad she could not rebound Block’s advances earlier in the issue), it is troublesome that this character, originally created to be something of a role model for female readers, takes such enjoyment in being an object of pleasure. While it can be said that Wonder Woman has always been a sexualized figure, O’Neil and his team created a Wonder Woman who was aware of her sexuality and enjoyed being an object of the male gaze.

The end of issue #178 points to another troubling message found in the late 1960s run of the comic book. As Wonder Woman had cleared Trevor’s name, he was willing to forgive her for her behavior in court. But as they sit on the couch after the trial, holding each other, the scene that follows points to Wonder Woman’s irrationality in regard to Trevor’s affections. As the scene begins Trevor is commenting on his new-found appreciation for Diana Prince, Wonder Woman’s alter ego.

**Steve:** She’s so much more than what I thought she was—in fact, I think I’ll ask her out one of these days and really get to know her. (O’Neil “Rival” 24)
As Trevor looks off frame, a smile spread across his face, Wonder Woman must take her feelings on the matter into account.

**Wonder Woman**: Why this is silly…I can’t be jealous of myself—can I? (24)

Here the writers portraying Wonder Woman cast her as a person whose happiness will be found in overthrowing another woman, herself. This new creative team, poised with an opportunity to push the boundaries of gender stereotypes and female representation, resort to the same woman-versus-woman narrative that Marston had embraced in the past – only now, the situation is reversed, and it is Wonder Woman who envies her allegedly less-powerful alter-ego. Once again, Wonder Woman must resort to dishonesty and competition, not in the name of protecting her secret identity or protecting her family from danger, but to retain Steve Trevor’s romantic interest.

**Wonder Woman**: If he can fall for Diana like this he can fall for any woman!

And I’ll lose him forever if I don’t do something to keep him interested in me.

(O’Neil “Rival” 24)

Just as Samantha was asked to keep her true nature at bay for the sake of her husband, and Jeannie lived her life to please her “master,” so too must Wonder Woman decide how she is going to deal with the possibility of Steve’s affection being placed elsewhere. Her response places her firmly within the subservient, gendered role that was still commonly expected of women in the 1960s:

**Wonder Woman**: Wonder Woman must change. (24)

The changes Diana predicted at the end of #178 are brought to bear on *Wonder Woman* #179 (Dec. 1968). The issue begins with the fitting caption, “This is the most bizarre adventure that you’ve ever witnessed!” As the story opens, the civilian Diana Prince has just learned of
Trevor’s alleged disloyalty to the United States government when she is telepathically summoned by her mother Hippolyta. Heeding the call to return to Paradise Island, Wonder Woman soon learns that the work the Amazonians had been doing for thousands of years, protecting and educating the man’s world, has drained them of their powers. The only solution is for the Amazonians to travel to another dimension to recharge. Diana refuses to leave, stating that, whereas she does love her mother and her Amazon sisters, “Steve Trevor desperately needs me” (O’Neil “Battle” 9). Her mother, knowing she cannot change Diana’s mind, offers no advice or guidance.

With the issues’ “awesome Amazon rite of renunciation” (10), what began with cosmetic changes in issue #178 has escalated into the stripping away of Diana’s power as she caters to Trevor’s needs. The ritual rejection of Wonder Woman’s powers, and costume, comprises one panel, showing a scantily-clad Diana on one knee, thighs bared, kneeling before her costume, her bracelets of submission, and lasso of truth. As Wonder Woman flies away and Paradise Island slowly vanishes behind her, she laments that everything that once sustained her, her childhood and her family, are all gone. “I shall be truly alone…an orphan…without friends, without a home…a stranger and alone” (10). Paradise Island was a site of strength for Diana, the place where she trained, learned to be a hero, and fought for her family. It was the one place where Wonder Woman could escape the global patriarchy, a place where her power could be her own.

The abandonment of this site, a final vestige of true inclusion, agency, and power, was the most blatant removal of power in the Wonder Woman mythos to date. The Wonder Woman of the late 1960s, as was Samantha from Bewitched, was a culturally relevant product of the sociopolitical contexts of the decade; both chose to change the makeup of who they were for their romantic interests. Wonder Woman’s rejection of her power, and, by extension, a portion of
her identity, brought with it a new status quo. No longer would Wonder Woman be considered a
freak or stand out as an icon for that which was different. Instead, the identity of Wonder
Woman was sacrificed on the altar of romantic interest. DC may have claimed that these changes
were designed to “modernize Wonder Woman during a time of cultural change” (Lee 101), but
the removal of Diana’s power is another example of male writers extolling patriarchal
traditionalism by wresting away female power, which again points to theme of paradoxical
positioning introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Empowered women, whether they be
fictional or otherwise, were many times stripped of their power, either by their own choices or by
choices made by others.

Closing the Chapter on the 1960s

Authors such as Mike Madrid consider Wonder Woman’s origins to be feminist in nature.
Likewise, Tim Hanley, author of the book *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the
World’s Most Famous Heroine*, states that Marston’s Wonder Woman was “all about female
strength and superiority” (Hanley, “America’s Silver Age”). Though there is value in these
readings, they nonetheless overlook the complicated history of Wonder Woman’s representation.
Such a past, marked with paradoxical positioning, is not reserved solely for Wonder Woman. As
I have argued in this chapter, representations of other powerful women – Samantha, Jeannie, and
Lois Lane – are all also present within hegemonic spaces, but rendered absent by means of the
terms of that presentation.

As America entered the 1960s, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* asked society to
question the role of women in the home and the workplace. Meanwhile, Wonder Woman found
herself working first as a nurse, then as Trevor’s personal secretary, solely because such roles
functioned as avenues for advancement for Trevor. Such career moves create a paradoxical
position for Wonder Woman, a hero who was created to be present alongside her male counterparts such as Superman. But in seeking out domestication, or a suitor who sought to domesticate her, Wonder Woman rendered herself absent from a space of power. The writers’ consistent desire to domesticate Diana is not unlike the messages about confining oneself to traditional gender roles that remained predominant in American society in the 1960s. While housewives and mothers were adhering to the norms that were put before them, many of them found that their places, their roles, were unsatisfying. Regardless, male-led creative teams in entertainment continued to push their narrow visions of domestic bliss, despite how powerful their female heroes were. Paradoxical placement could be found on television as well on shows such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. Both programs were home to female protagonists who were far more powerful than the men with whom they occupied space, but that power is weakened as both women had their agency controlled by the patriarchy.

In this chapter, I have endeavored to evaluate the presence and absence of the powerful female figure within spaces of power from the 1940s to the 1960s, as well as the particular cultural moment that such figures have come to represent. An understanding of a given era’s cultural context can only help scholars and critics come to a better understanding of the arenas that culture constructs. It is these arenas that I argue are little more than a space to highlight the absence, as opposed to the power, of the female body. The understanding of such arenas will play an important role in addressing the issues of power and absence as this investigation moves on to evaluate the representation of women in comics and on film in the 1970s.
CHAPTER II: REVOLUTION AND REIFICATION (1970s)

In chapter one, I reviewed the tenets of tradition that circumscribed the lives of women at home and in the workplace in the 1960s, as well as the ways in which those tenets were manifest in popular cultural outpourings, including television and comics. As I noted in that chapter, in The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan cast a critical light on some of these issues, particularly many women’s dissatisfaction with societal expectations. Building on her ideas, I interrogated the paradox of the relative presence and absence of the fictional female in this period, exemplified by the performances of fictional characters such as Wonder Woman, Lois Lane, and Samantha in Bewitched. While these characters seemed to represent a step forward for women as they took center stage in their own stories, they were constantly held in check by a patriarchal system fueled by their continued domestication and submission to the male characters in these narratives.

In this chapter, I argue that the seeds sown in the 1960s would, in the 1970s, blossom into a larger, more powerful movement that fundamentally challenged not only the ways in which women were allowed to live their actual lives, but also the ways in which their performance of womanhood represented in art and popular culture. The sexual revolution that began in the late 1960s continued and grew over the course of the 1970s, and its widening effects were frequently reflected in popular culture. While the paradox of the 1960s saw powerful woman rendered powerless, the sexual revolution of the 1970s led to another paradoxical quandary for women in popular culture, and in American society at large. While the revolution served to promote women’s sexual freedom, in many cases it also emboldened the creators of entertainment media to cast them as sexual objects in ways that ultimately reified traditional gender roles.

At the dawn of the decade, key feminist writings such as Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics...
and Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* helped to spread the gospel of gender equality and sexual freedom. In the early 1970s, the news more and more frequently included stories of women protesting sexism found in the home, in the workplace, and in popular culture. For example, in March of 1970, a group of activists marched on the offices of the male-run *Ladies’ Home Journal*, demanding that the magazine put in place an all-female editorial team; three years later, Lenore Hershey was hired as editor-in-chief of the magazine (Gibson). This and other triumphs of the period suggest that the feminist voice was far louder than it had been during the previous decade, and women were joining together as never before to stop injustice. The Take Back the Night marches, which are “[n]ow a staple on college campuses,” also began in the 1970s, as an opportunity for women to speak out against sexual violence and to hold vigils for women “who [had] been touched by violence” (Gibson). Calls for justice like these did not go unheard; across the country, many women of the 1970s were finally seeing the emergence of laws that would protect them, such as a Nebraska law passed in 1976 that made it illegal for a man to rape his wife (“Historical Timeline”). Workplace policies were also changing, providing new protections for women within the workforce. For example, in 1973, AT&T agreed to end discrimination in women's salaries and to pay retroactive compensation to its female employees (Medina). Despite these positive changes, though, the journey to equality was an Amazonian task fraught with myriad obstacles. In this chapter I seek to demonstrate that, while the fight for justice involved many positive steps forward, these advances were often countered by efforts to preserve or reinstate traditional social structures that oppressed and limited women.

In order to assess the ways in which feminism, equality, and activist thought were circulated throughout the 1970s, in this chapter I will examine some of the major social
movements and organizations of the period, before analyzing the representation of women in some of the popular media of the day. I look first to the National Organization of Women and the Women’s Strike for Equality, focusing on the strategies that were put into place both in the name of equality in the workplace and the home. I also address the backlash against the feminist movement in the early 1970s, a backlash that called for a return of traditional gender roles and denied the existence of sexism and inequality. With this larger cultural frame in place, I then turn to an analysis of the 1978 movie Grease, employing Victor Turner’s concept of the social drama to argue that Grease is a story of schism within a particular fictional community that, to a significant degree, paralleled a very real social schism in 1970s America. Here, I will also consider Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” analyzing Grease’s Sandy and the way she is framed and represented for the viewing pleasure of the movie-going audience; I argue that Grease offers a representation of community that both subverts and reaffirms the powerful influence of patriarchy. Through this critical lens, I read the film as an example of the larger culture’s paradoxical response to a women’s empowerment and sexuality in the 1970s. While there are many examples from the 1970s that I could draw from, when looking at issues concerning female empowerment during the decade, Grease’s enormous popular success suggests that the messages within the film were widely accepted. In the book Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration, Ednie Kaeh Garrison suggests that communication genres (television, movies, and plays) and the arenas they exist in (popular culture, popular media, and consumer media) “comprise a hegemonic and seductive public cultural institution” that is informed, and constructed by “political, economic, and cultural ideologies” (Garrison 25). That is to say, an examination of the most popular entertainments, can provide a glimpse into the social consciousness of the time, in this case, the 1970s
To conclude this chapter, I return to the main subject of this study, and investigate the relative presence and absence of Wonder Woman’s power in the 1970s. At the dawn of the decade, Wonder Woman’s writers and publishers were touting the power of the heroine while, at the same time, making changes to the title and the character that reinforced traditional gender norms, particularly regarding a woman’s power and agency being connected to the patriarchy. In sum, the chapter highlights the disparities that continued to exist in the 1970s between an increasingly empowered female presence and an increasingly visible female body, and the still provisional power, agency, or freedom given to women, who were often exploited for the male gaze under the pretense of sexual liberation and empowerment.

**When do we want equality? NOW!**

In the early 1970s in the United States, feminism was in the early stages of its second wave. Decades before, first-wave feminists had secured women’s right to vote and to own property; despite these enormous and important advances, women retained largely subordinate roles in the workplace, in the home, and in courts of law. Within the second wave, however, feminist focused their efforts on civil rights and sexual empowerment, as well as seeking out original ways to talk about liberation. Helping in the effort to bring issues of gender inequality to light was NOW, the National Organization for Women. Founded in 1966 and still active today “with hundreds of chapters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia and hundreds of thousands of contributing members and supporters,” NOW’s focus was, and continues to be, fighting for equality for women:

The Foundation focuses on a broad range of women’s rights issues, including economic justice, pay equity, racial discrimination, women’s health and body image, women with disabilities, reproductive rights
and justice, family law, marriage and family formation rights of same-sex couples, representation of women in the media, and global feminist issues. (“About the NOW Foundation”)

Though the federally-funded Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was created in 1965 to uphold laws concerning workplace discrimination, most women were still not receiving equal pay for equal work. The need to pressure businesses and government to adhere to and enforce laws concerning workplace discrimination brought about the creation of NOW and, in turn, led to the Women’s Strike for Equality in August of 1970. The Strike, the first rally of its type, brought together 20,000 women in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, which had given women the right to vote. The rally was designed to bring to light the fact that, despite strides made towards equality in the 1960s, there was still much to do.

In 1970, women who were employed full time, “typically earned less than 60 cents for every dollar earned by men” (Levine 2). The weight of this inconstancy was widespread, regardless of women’s levels of education, aptitude, and professionalism relative to those of their male coworkers, and many women struggled to find adequate opportunities to earn their sixty percent in the first place. Take, for instance, the case of Sandra Day O’Connor, who graduated from Stanford Law School in 1952. O’Connor, who would one day be appointed by Ronald Reagan to serve as Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, graduated third in her class of 102. Despite her academic success, O’Connor found it difficult to get work. For her 2006 biography, *Sandra Day O’Connor: Justice in the Balance*, Ann McFeatters interviewed O’Connor and talked of the post-graduation job struggle. O’Connor spoke to how unprepared she was for an interview at a California law firm.
I was shocked. I think I was naïve. I had never stopped to think that it might be hard to get a job. The partner who interviewed me said, “Miss Day, how do you type?” And I said “Well, fair, not great, I can get by.” He said, “Well if you type well enough, I might be able to get you a job as a legal secretary. But we have never hired a woman as a lawyer here. And we don’t anticipate doing it.” (qtd. in McFeatters 45)

As a Stanford Law graduate, O’Connor entered the career arena armed with both her own outstanding academic record and the sterling reputation of her alma mater, but patriarchal limitations impeded what might otherwise have been a rapid rise. Unfortunately, her power was rendered absent by sexist policies that kept her from entering the workforce for many years. From 1957 to 1964, O’Connor focused on raising her three sons, and in 1965, when she was ready to go back to work full-time, there were still no law firms that would hire her. She finally applied for a job at the Arizona attorney general’s office and, because she gained “a solid reputation as a hard-working lawyer,” in 1969 O’Connor was appointed to a vacancy in the Arizona state senate (48). McFeatters goes on to note that O’Connor would not have her first taste of judicial work until 1974, twenty-two years after she graduated from Stanford. If such troubles befell an educated and accomplished graduate of Stanford Law, it stands to reason that countless other American women, the majority of whom were not afforded the privilege of earning top-tier legal educations, were even more heavily weighted by the patriarchy.

Discrimination in the 1970s workplace went far beyond hiring policies and equal work for equal pay. In her book, Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media, Susan Jeanne Douglas posits that workplace inconsistencies included issues such as limited availability of work hours and stereotypes about women’s physical strength: “Forty-three states
limited the number of hours women could work, generally to eight” (196). By attaining equal access to the workplace, women had become present, but due to restrictions on work hours that prohibited potential overtime and bonuses, the power they had earned was severely limited, thus rendering them absent. Douglas goes on to speak to the perceived frailty of the female body within the workplace: “Some states restricted the amount of weight a woman could carry on the job—anywhere from ten to thirty-five pounds, in other words the weight of a child from infancy to kindergarten” (196). Despite significant steps forward, by the early 1970s, there was still a sharp disparity between women and men in the workplace, from compensation, to hours worked, to tasks both were allowed to perform. The members of NOW believed that without action on their parts, few people would be fighting to make government and businesses adhere to workplace-related law. The need for the Women’s Strike was clear.

The Strike in New York, held in August of 1970, was “an undeniable success with more than fifty thousand attendees” (Zeisler 61). Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue was peppered with signage calling attention to the concerns of the crowd. “Don’t iron while the strike is hot,” “We are the 51% minority,” “We have the right to vote for the man of our choice,” and, “I am not a Barbie doll,” were only some of the sentiments hoisted by female protesters and male allies alike. Frieden, who spearheaded NOW and the Strike, called on women in other states to come together as well. In Washington, D.C., protesters and government workers created educational demonstrations designed to teach people about gender inequality and discrimination. In the same city, protestors marched down Connecticut avenue, raising a banner that read, “We Demand Equality” (“Nation: Women on the March”). With the Strike, the presence of women was clearly and powerfully demonstrated.
As I have stated previously, however, rarely are demonstrations of presence received without some kind of oppositional response. In her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, Susan Faludi suggests that there is, and has always been, a push back against progress made in the name of gender equality. She writes, “The antifeminist backlash has been set off not by women’s achievement of full equality, but by the increased possibility that they might win it. It is a preemptive strike that stops women long before they reach the finish line” (11). Those who spoke out against Friedan, NOW, or the Women’s Strike for Equality, did not always do so because of a disdain for women; rather, it can be argued that they feared a future where equality was expected and possibly even enforced. Whereas this sentiment does not excuse the ways in which news outlets and authors spoke out against the Strike or the work of NOW, it provides a clearer understanding of why these attacks were made. Some of these attacks, found in the coverage of the Strike, came from major news sources, and were used in an attempt to destabilize its message. For example, the *New York Times* highlighted a snafu in Betty Friedan’s schedule in an article entitled “Leading Feminist Puts Hairdo Before Strike”:

> Betty Friedan was 20 minutes late for her first scheduled appearance in connection with the Woman’s Strike for Equality yesterday morning because of a last minute emergency appointment with her hairdresser. [Friedan was] wearing a raspberry-colored shift she bought in Finland three years ago (“I intended to buy a new dress to wear today but I forgot”)…. “I don’t want people to think Women’s Lib girls don’t care about how they look,” she said…. “We should try to be pretty as we can, it’s good for our self-image and it’s good politics.”

(“Leading Feminist”)
Aside from an attempted erosion of NOW’s message, coverage such as this New York Times piece renders Friedan’s power absent by misrepresenting her as a woman who cares more about her looks than she does NOW. As a published author who was respected amongst her peers, and as a woman who could draw media attention, Friedan existed in a place of power; but when the Times article portrayed her in such a condescending fashion, her power was framed as little more than an element of control over what she does with her clothes and hair. In this we have an example of a woman, Frieden, who has a particular kind of freedom in how she presents herself physically. The Times article, however, creates a paradox in focusing solely on Frieden’s physical appearance and femininity.

ABC News’ coverage of the strike was not much better. Its evening newscast on August 26, 1970, opened with Vice President Spiro Agnew remarking, “Three things have been difficult to tame: the oceans, the fools, and the women. We may soon be able to tame the oceans, but fools and women will take a little longer” (Zeisler 61). Instead of covering the content of the Strike, or the aims it was seeking to achieve, ABC chose to focus on the reactionary response of a conservative politician.

Despite considerable resistance towards NOW and the women’s movement, the early 1970s were also a time of positive change. In 1971, a year after the Strike for Equality, feminist activists were fighting against media misrepresentation that dismissed, belittled, or hyper-sexualized women. Scholar Andi Zeisler writes that these activists “became wildly prolific, conveying experiences and urgency of women’s liberation through writing and publishing,” and goes on to identify two major categories of literature that emerged from the women’s movement: books and magazines (64). Regarding the former, the 1970s saw the publication of many books by key feminist activists such as Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, and Robin Morgan.
Significantly, these books were edited by other feminist activists, ensuring that the messages within them were not marred by anti-feminist, editorial sentiment. The second type of feminist writing, “zines, newsletters […] written by women, for women, and published on shoestring budgets […] were part of a burgeoning underground” (Zeisler 64). Zeisler argues that 1971 alone saw a dramatic rise in feminist publications of this sort, designed to circulate the transcripts of public speeches and the non-fiction writings of women associated with the movement, serving as “guidebooks introducing outsiders to the concept of women’s liberation” (64). One such publication that made its debut that year was Gloria Steinem’s Ms. magazine, which hit newsstands in December 1971.

Steinem and a team of other female journalists began publishing Ms. with the hope that it would “serve as a forum for the women’s movement, something the leaders characterize not as a reform, but a revolution” (Gloria). While Ms. “borrowed the service-oriented format of women’s magazines such as Redbook and Good Housekeeping,” – publications that were overloaded with articles like “50 Ways to Improve Your Cooking,” or “120 Ways to Please a Man” – Steinem instead published articles such as “How to Write Your Own Marriage Contract” and “Rating the Candidates: Feminists Vote the Rascals In or Out” (Zeisler 65). Steinem created Ms. because she felt “that there really was nothing for women to read that was controlled by women,” but many detractors failed to see the need for such a publication (Gloria). They used their visibility and resources not only to question the necessity of Ms., but also to question the project’s sustainability. ABC’s Harry Reasoner was one such voice, using a segment of his television show Commentary: Harry Reasoner to state, with certainty, that the magazine would not last three issues:
The first edition of Ms., described as a new magazine for women, is at hand, and it’s pretty sad…. I can imagine some stark anti-sexist editorial meeting trying to decide what to do next. After you've got marriage contracts, role exchanging, and the female identity crisis, what do you do? As I said, it's sad, because not even the most Neanderthal of us like predictability. (Gloria)

The supposedly doomed magazine sold out of its printings in one week, despite analysts telling Steinem that the first issue would be on newsstands for three months. It continues to be published today.

While readers were reading Ms. during its early years, activists and legislators were also making progress towards protecting a woman’s right to control her own body. In 1973, a year after Ms. published the names of women admitting to having abortions when the procedure was still illegal in America, the landmark case Roe v. Wade officially legalized abortion (Willis 122). After having reached the Supreme Court in 1970, the history-changing decision was not just a victory for the feminist movement; it also sparked an ongoing conversation about the role of government in reproductive rights, women’s roles in society, and, of course, reproductive health. As current NOW president Terry O’Neill notes, Roe v. Wade did not instantly create equality for women: “the ongoing march toward full equality for all women requires more than an acknowledgement that a ‘right to choose’ exists” (O’Neil). The decision brought about by Roe v. Wade, along with the advent of Ms. and other women’s movement publications of the early 1970s, nonetheless functioned as stepping stones towards the rise of the independent, and often revolutionary, 1970s woman.
Hopelessly Subjected to You: *Grease* and the Male Gaze

As the preceding section makes clear, during the early 1970s many women were becoming more socially and politically visible than their predecessors. Theatre historian Stacy Wolf posits that these steps towards increased power in the early 1970s also extended into new dialogues concerning woman’s sexual agency:

The increased visibility of feminism with a focus on individual life choices shifted social mores and practices around heterosexuality, marriage, and relationships. Long-standing dating rituals morphed into group socializing and “relationships,” a new word first used in everyday parlance in the 1970s, which included cohabitation before marriage, open marriages, and group sex. Women were allowed to and even encouraged to have and express sexual desires, to be sexual agents rather than only passive recipients of male attention. (94)

The influence of this increase in presence and power in social and political realms extended to the performing arts as well. As I argued in chapter one, *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* featured powerful female protagonists, yet their power was muted by tethering it to the whims of the men in their lives. By contrast, the 1970s saw the release of movies like *Grease*, which allowed its female protagonist, Sandy, more sexual freedom than her 1960s counterparts. Despite this important step forward, however, Sandy’s power was still dictated by traditional guidelines, and the sexual liberation of all the female characters was defined and kept in check by the patriarchal forces in this fictional universe. The restriction of Sandy’s power in the film is telling of the sociopolitical makeup of the late 1970s.
In 1978, the Woman’s Army Corps was abolished as women were integrated into the Army proper, 53-year-old Mavis Hutchinson became the first woman to run across the United States, and Paramount Pictures released *Grease*, based on the 1971 stage musical by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey. The movie, a musical romantic comedy, follows the foibles of teenagers Sandy Olson, played by a then-29-year-old Olivia Newton-John, and Danny Zuko, played by 23-year-old John Travolta, as they traverse the tumultuous emotional waters of their senior years at fictional Rydell High. Actors Stockard Channing and Jeff Conaway rounded out the cast of “teenagers” who sang, shimmed, and shook their way to enormous commercial success. According to the website *Box Office Mojo*, the film grossed $8,941,717 during its opening weekend and was shown in 862 theatres in both the United States and Canada. This made *Grease* the number two movie at the box office that year, as *Jaws* chomped its way to the number one spot. *Grease*’s popularity continued to grow after its initial commercial success; as of 2015, the movie has grossed $188,755,690 domestically and $206,200,000 internationally, totaling $394,955,690 worldwide, making it the highest grossing movie musical to date in the United States (*Grease*).

On the movie’s opening day, *New York Times* film reviewer Vincent Canby praised the film, stating that *Grease* was a “contemporary fantasy about a 1950's teen-age musical—a larger, funnier, wittier and more-imaginative-than-Hollywood movie with a life that is all its own.” Canby went on to suggest that the world of *Grease* had “less to do with any real 50's than with a kind of show business that is both timeless and old-fashioned, both sentimental and wise” (Canby). This assessment goes a long way toward understanding the world viewers were asked to inhabit while watching the film. From the costumes and the sometimes gravity-defying hairdos, to the exuberant and angst-ridden musical numbers, *Grease*, using many of the same
formulas that made the stage musical a success, provides a fantastical vision of 1950s youth culture in the United States. But beyond the fantasy, the movie is also founded on very particular performances of gender and sexual freedom that were prevalent in the 1970s.

In order to examine what *Grease*’s representation of its female lead might say about American culture in the 1970s at large, I look first to film theorist Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which is widely regarded as a piece that “excited and transformed contemporary film theory” (Humm 16). In the essay, which was first published in 1975, Mulvey coins the phrase “male gaze” to denote the way that a camera is used to capture the female form. Since its inception, the phrase has been applied to works created in a variety of artistic mediums and cultural works. When Mulvey introduced it, however, the idea of male gaze was applied specifically to film, which is how I will use it as well. In sum, she argues that images of women on film typically represent them as passive objects yielding to the more active – and often voyeuristic – eyes of patriarchal audiences. Building on Mulvey’s ideas, I argue that *Grease* provides numerous examples of the ways that the gaze of the movie’s audience is manipulated, particularly in musical numbers such as “Summer Nights,” “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee,” “Hopelessly Devoted to You,” and “You’re the One that I Want.” To supplement this study, I also draw on the ideas of Victor Turner outlined in his book, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*.

In his book, Turner quotes Andrey Richards, claiming that there are structures or models that dictate what people “believe they do, ought to do, or would like to do” (36). As these blueprints for behavior are different for every person within a thriving social group, all the members of the social group will have different ways of behaving, and have different goals that they want to accomplish. An analysis of these models “involves the study of the communication
process, including the sources of pressures to communicate within and among groups,” which in turn leads to an analysis of the verbal and non-verbal actions that people take up “in order to attain personal and group goals” (37). Therefore, the Social Drama is a unit, or a moment, of disharmony that arises because of conflict situations, brought on by a group members’ “alternative goals and alternative means of attaining them” (37). Using Turner’s concept of the Social Drama as a lens by which to analyze Grease, an aesthetic drama, allows for a reading of Sandy, a seemingly morally pure character, as a negative presence within the narrative, a breach that interferes with a community or social group, as that group works to achieve their varied but connected personal goals.

While Mulvey’s work will be used to analyze the actual framing of Sandy’s body within the narrative, Turner’s research will be used to address Sandy’s social framing within the Rydell High universe. That is to say, Turner’s theory of the social drama underscores my endeavor to read Grease, a fictitious portrait of life in the 1950s, as a commentary on various social conflicts of the 1970s. In this regard, I will argue that the social conflicts within the fictional world of Grease mirror some of the ongoing social issues of the 1970s, including, but not limited to, expressions of female sexuality and the continuing struggle for gender equality.

Grease’s first big musical number, “Summer Nights,” finds the teenagers palling around during the first day of their senior year. Danny and Sandy regale their separate gender-homogenous friend groups with stories of their summertime, romantic exploits. The irony of the moment is created through the audience’s understanding that, while Danny and Sandy are both reminiscing about their supposedly fleeting summer romance, neither knows that the other is doing it at the same time, and at the same school. In the song Danny tells a story laden with sexual innuendo and bravado, while Sandy’s version of events is one of innocent romance: when
Sandy sings, “He got friendly holding my hand,” Danny counters with, “Well, she got friendly down in the sand.” The lyrics of “Summer Nights” are accompanied by dance moves that embody the romantic/sexual narratives told by Danny and Sandy, respectively. “Summer Nights” offers a glimpse into Sandy’s worldview; however, the song also presents audiences with a troubling preview of the complicated sexual politics that will come into play as the film’s narrative unfolds.

Danny and Sandy, the film’s protagonists, present their audiences with two different points of view, and as the movie progresses, these points of view ultimately fuel their goals. Danny’s goal is to be involved in a sexual relationship with Sandy, while Sandy’s goal is, at least in the beginning of the film’s story, to cling to her traditional, virginal moral code. To be clear, Sandy’s morality does not dictate that she is incapable of being a sexual being, but she chooses not to engage in such acts.

These two agendas are the beginning of the “conflict situation,” or the Social Drama that will, throughout the course of the film, play out in “four main phases of public action, accessible to observation” (Turner 38). The four phases, as per Turner’s model which I will be using to track Sandy’s presence throughout the film, are Breech, Mounting Crisis, Redressive Action, and Reintegration.

For Turner, the first phase in a social drama is that of a Breach. There must be a disruption of regular “social relations…between persons or groups within the same system of social relations” (38). Just as Steinem’s Ms. disrupted the norms set by other magazines aimed at a female readership, so too did Sandy’s arrival disrupt the social relationships at Rydell High. As noted above, Sandy is a symbol of traditional morality, love, and hope, and she “acts, or believes [she] acts, on behalf” of those who, she believes, should share her ideals (Turner 38). Danny, on
the other hand, is primarily interested in maintaining his tough-guy appearance, an image that is vital to his role as the leader of his gang, the Thunderbirds (T-Birds). Thus, when he discovers that his “summer love,” the object of his earlier lewd display, is in fact a new student at his school and is interested in continuing with the romance that was born in the summer months before, he devastates her with a cavalier dismissal for the benefit of his peers and himself. Danny’s cohort finds his cavalier move hilarious; likewise, Stockard Channing’s Rizzo, the leader of the T-Birds’ sister gang, the Pink Ladies, takes great pleasure in watching Danny feign disinterest in Sandy’s presence. From the outset, it is clear that Rizzo is a woman in control of her sexuality, and this control gives her a particular kind of power. Rizzo is immediately set in opposition to Sandy and her morality, and this interaction between Sandy, Danny, and the other members of the T-Birds and Pink Ladies constitutes a Breach to that community.

While Sandy’s role in *Grease* does, at first glance, seem to be little more than that of a fawning and virginal young lady motivated solely by her desire for innocent romance, her paradoxical positioning stems from the fact that the movie is also designed to display Sandy as a sexual object. This shift is made abundantly clear at the end of the film, when she trades in her conventional image and modest clothing for those of a leather-clad rebel. Despite this change in her appearance, Sandy’s goal remains the same: to win Danny’s love, and by extension, to be in a committed relationship with him. Again, it is not that Sandy does not have the capacity for the kind of sexual expression that seems to be such an influential part of Rizzo’s make up, but Sandy wishes to explore those aspects of her sexuality while in a committed relationship.

The filmmakers’ choice to present Sandy in this manner, having her change her entire sense of being for the love of a man and subjecting her to the voyeuristic male gaze, is in direct conflict to the message that NOW was promoting in the 1970s – a message of equality and
sexual empowerment. Neither the stereotypically naïve and innocent version of Sandy, nor the hyper-sexualized vision in black leather, aligned with the goals of the women’s movement such as it was configured in the 1970s.

Throughout most of the movie, while Danny, Rizzo, and their respective entourages freely express their worldly wisdom through the use of sexual innuendo and suggestive dance moves, Sandy is the innocent other, who finds it difficult to assimilate into the culture of Rydell High. This “otherness” is best displayed in the song “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee.” In one of the film’s early scenes, Frenchy, the only Pink Lady who seems to truly like Sandy, invites the newcomer to join them for a sleepover. In due course, Sandy becomes physically ill during an attempt to pierce her ears. While Sandy is in the bathroom coping with her personal trauma, Rizzo leads her compatriots in song: “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee.” The number is an enthusiastic, mean-spirited critique of Sandy’s conservative morals and naïve worldview, and the women gleefully ridicule Sandy’s aversions to smoking, drinking, swearing, and engaging in pre-marital sex.

As I argued in chapter one, both Bewitched and Wonder Woman missed opportunities to highlight sisterhood within their narratives, and “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” is no different. As Wolf suggests, the 1970s were a time of sexual liberation, and by mocking Sandy’s conservative nature, Rizzo affirms the value of the sexual revolution. At the same time, however, she denies Sandy her right to express her own sexuality in any way she sees fit. The male writers of both the musical and the screenplay offer the audience Rizzo, a woman empowered in her sexuality, who is actively devaluing the sexual power of another woman. In crafting Rizzo’s character in this way, the story of Grease takes on an undertone of peer pressure, bullying, and moral assimilation, disguised as proclamations of sexual revolution.
This paradoxical positioning of women simultaneously freed by and enslaved to society’s evolving definitions of sexual identity sacrifices an opportunity to promote sisterhood and to celebrate the variety of options available to women. In his book, *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals*, Scott Miller points to some of the sentiments that Sandy subscribes to, positing that “to many American traditionalists, the 1950s are the Eden of modern America’s superpower creation story,” thus making Sandy an example of a time “of unstained innocence and clear-cut rules” (29). Rizzo’s views of sexuality do not fall in line with 1950s rules about female sexuality, and she wants it to be very clear that no one can tell her what to do with her body. To that end, she is the antithesis of the 1950s model of traditional feminine sexuality, espousing instead what could be taken for feminist ideologies that were sparked during the early 1970s. Rizzo embodies the paradox of the age: while she could have sung of sexual rebellion while also celebrating Sandy’s right to make different choices based on a different moral code, she chose a path that was, at heart, no more accepting than the traditional values she railed against.

The “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” scene also demonstrates that, while Sandy’s presence is upsetting the balance in her new social group, her Breach is now bringing about the second phase in Turner’s model: the Mounting Crisis. Sandy’s sense of morality is at war with Rizzo’s, and because, as Turner notes, this Breach has not been sealed off quickly, “a phase of mounting crisis supervenes, during which…there is a tendency for the breach to widen and extend” (Turner 38). Sandy’s morality is seen by the group as something threatening to Rizzo’s own sexuality, and it becomes a point of mockery amongst the young ladies who Sandy, naively, believes to be her friends. Building on this theoretical framework, the moments following the song may be read a continuation of the Mounting Crisis; when Sandy returns to the slumber party, thus bringing all meanness to a halt, Rizzo defends her actions with a pithy, “Some people are so touchy,”
suggesting to the audience that such abuses, perpetuated by other women in this example, are to be taken lightly. What had been snickers and giggles behind Sandy’s back, have grown to great heights, and the young woman finds herself more set apart from this particular community than ever before. Here we see that the “crisis,” brought about by the breach of Sandy’s morality within the social group, is rising, mounting as an inability for Rizzo’s and Sandy’s moralities to co-exist within the same social group causes the Breach to widen.

This scene also exemplifies Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze at work, thinly veiled as an empowering expression of sexual freedom. During the song, the characters bound about the bedroom in silky tops and underwear, thrusting their breasts one minute and falling about and raising their open legs in the next. As Rizzo and company critique Sandy, they are showcasing their own sexual liberation, a move that rang true for many audiences in the late 1970s. Miller suggests that this sort of sexual forwardness falls in line with the ideals of teenagers of that time:

This was arguably the first time in history that parents’ worldview no longer matched their teenager’s worldview. American teenagers now had independent life experience, disconnected from their parents’ experience, and so they were coming to new and different conclusions about how they saw themselves and their world. (28)

Rizzo disparaging Sandy’s sexual inhibitions would not ring false or turn away audiences of the 1970s, particularly when the ridicule is rife with opportunities to view the bodies of Rizzo, Frenchy, and the other women as sexually charged objects. The male gaze, Mulvey states, “projects its phantasy [sic] on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-
ness” (62). The slumber party scene, with its giggling and scantily-clad women taking part in sexually suggestive shenanigans, asks the audience to gaze upon and compare two different types of bodies. Just as “Summer Nights” contrasted the chaste woman against the sexual man, “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” presents Rizzo and the other women as warm to and accepting of sexual conquest, in stark contrast to Sandy, who if not frigid is nonetheless ignorant of such things. Further, this scene is designed to present a fantasy of women’s private versus public conduct; while the women are given voice and visibility, ultimately the scene objectifies rather than empowers.

The paradoxical vision of women continues as the movie pushes forward. Following her interaction with the other girls at the slumber party, Sandy retreats to the backyard, where she writes a love letter to Danny. This moment of innocent love and heartbreak is transposed into the song “Hopelessly Devoted to You.” Written specifically for the film, “Hopelessly Devoted to You” further establishes Sandy’s simplistic understanding of relationships and love. As Sandy walks about outside, looking longingly at the night sky, she comments on her folly:

Guess mine is not the first heart broken
My eyes are not the first to cry
I'm not the first to know
There's just no getting over you
You know, I'm just a fool who's willing
To sit around and wait for you
But baby, can't you see
There's nothing else for me to do?
I'm hopelessly devoted to you. (Grease 1978)
As the song makes clear, Sandy is content to be with Danny despite her knowledge of the way he conducts himself with other women. She also acknowledges that she is a fool to wait for Danny to reciprocate her affection towards him, but in the end, this is role that she chooses to play. Sandy is aware that a relationship with Danny will require her to compromise her moral code, but her dedication to him is such that she believes he will be worth the sacrifice. As with “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee,” “Hopelessly Devoted to You” is a critique of Sandy’s views on sex and relationships. This time, however, the assessment comes from Sandy herself, and the audience is asked to look on the contrast between the sexless being that Sandy performs, and the sexual being that Sandy is hiding inside of herself, the being that is wholly capable of the kinds of carnality that both Danny and Rizzo laud.

“Hopelessly Devoted to You” may not be as transparent in its objectification of the female body as is “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee,” but it does provide an example of Sandy’s fervent desire for Danny. The verses and choruses capture the energy of 1950s love ballads. While Sandy sings, the camera settles, for a substantial amount of time, on medium to close shots, which, along with a high-collared, white (virginal) nightgown, do little to highlight the actor’s body. During these moments, Sandy moves from one expression of desire to another, and her body language suggests that pining has left her weak, as she alternates between propping herself up against the railing or the gazebo and kneeling on the ground, leading with her chest as she journeys about the yard. Her facial expressions also convey her heartbroken innocence; she smiles warmly while talking about what a fool she is, for example, and both her pain and her desire read on her face as she sings of her devotion to Danny. The actor’s body is captured in such a way as to showcase Sandy as a young virgin who is wounded with unrelenting desire for a man she knows will, ultimately, do her wrong.
Mulvey suggests that these techniques, the framing of the body in such a way as to
stimulate fantasy, are techniques meant to satisfy desire:

> Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness,
cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.
Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of
time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of
space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a
world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure
of desire. (67)

As Sandy moves through the yard, the camera angles construct a fantasy, a world in which a
young virgin would give herself to a man, in the name of satisfying love. Even as Sandy has
completed her transformation at the end of the movie into sexually empowered mover and
shaker, her black shirt and dark pants, while form-fitting, expose very little of her body. Here,
while Sandy is not being overtly sexualized, there is still the implied promise of sexual yearning
and desire. “Hopelessly Devoted to You” focuses on the private expression of desire from
Sandy; though she still clings publicly to her “good girl” status, viewers are now privy to her
secret longings, and they are invited to take part in the fantasy of the young virgin who, despite
her unadventurous outer demeanor, is an amorous young woman who craves sexual
companionship.

The song ends with Sandy kneeling at a small child’s pool, first looking down at an
image of Danny superimposed on the water, and then submerging the letter of her affection in
the water, swiping the pink paper through Danny’s smiling image. This act visually brings the
actor’s suggestive moments to metaphoric climax; it not only suggests that her devotion comes
complete with physical arousal, the sexually expressive side of herself that Sandy chooses to silence, but it also functions as a callback to the song lyric, “He ran by me, got my suit damp,” one of many double entendres found in “Summer Nights.”

Though his transformation is less convincing and complete than Sandy’s, Danny also takes actions that lead towards a sense of Mounting Crisis. When he comes to believe that Sandy is interested in another young man who is active in the Rydell athletic scene, Danny attempts a metamorphosis from lothario to respectful and responsible jock. The transition, which ultimately does not work as a Mounting Crisis on the scale that Sandy does, is entirely feigned. Danny makes this clear when he makes aggressive sexual advances towards Sandy, convinced that giving her his class ring gives him special rights to her body. Furious, Sandy storms away from Danny, her indignation suggesting that she has, in fact, given up on her pursuit. It is not long, however, before Sandy once again changes her mind, and her reprise of “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” suggests that she has promptly forgiven and forgotten all of Danny’s offenses.

The reprise of the tune recounts Sandy’s decision to adopt a new moral code. It begins:

Look at me, there has to be
Something more than what they see
Wholesome and pure
Oh so scared and unsure
A poor man's Sandra Dee (Grease 1978)

Sandy, the young girl who, until this moment, was no less exuberant and no less kind for abstaining from the vices of the day, is trying to convince herself that there is more to her than her wholesome image. She continues:

Sandy, you must start anew
Don't you know what you must do?
Hold your head high
Take a deep breath and sigh
"Goodbye to Sandra Dee..." (*Grease* 1978)

These lines forecast the change that is manifest in the final scenes.

Sandy’s advice to herself in this reprise is an example of the third step in Turner’s social drama: Redressive Action. Turner states that “in order to limit the spread of crisis, certain adjustive and redressive ‘mechanisms’” are brought into play (39). In order to restore order and deal with the widening Breach, action must be taken. Until this point in the story, every time that Sandy’s moral code has been interrogated, it has been an external attempt to combat her social Breach. When Danny was embarrassed to be seen with Sandy, for example, or when he aggressively encouraged her to have a sexual relationship with him, his actions were designed to limit the spread of the Crisis and to counteract her socially disruptive presence. Until the reprise of “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee,” these and other attempts at controlling or altering Sandy had been carried out solely by “leading or structurally representative members of the disturbed social system” (39). Ultimately, though, Sandy is the only one who can successfully dismantle her own “good girl” persona; thus, when Danny risks his life during a car race against a rival gang member, Sandy’s fear of losing him finally pushes her over the precipice. Her desire to change not only speaks to her desire to belong to Danny, however, but also of her longing to become a member of the ruling social body, thus mending the Breach that she brought about initially.

The final scenes of the movie take place during Rydell High’s end-of-the-year carnival. Early in these moments, it is revealed that Danny has, in fact, performed his feigned new role of jock well enough to obtain a letter in track and field. The white sweater he wears is the only
change that he’s made to his appearance, but is a noteworthy signifier not only of Danny’s change in social status, but also of a potential willingness to meet Sandy halfway, as the color of the garment may be said to represent purity. In wearing the sweater, Danny is publicly declaring that he is now the kind of young man that he believes Sandy is interested in, and that he has changed for her. Danny’s fellow T-Birds are quick to mock him, a suggestion that a man changing his behavior and attitude for a woman is ludicrous. Danny counters that he will make whatever changes he has to in order to get Sandy back, but, as the words come out of his mouth, Sandy appears, eliminating any opportunity the audience has to consider the ramifications of Danny’s new attitude or wardrobe. “You’re the One That I Want,” also written specifically for the film, heralds the birth of the new Sandy Olson, complete with leather jacket, permed hair, skin tight black clothing, and cigarette. Danny is quick to discard the single symbol of his transformation, throwing his white sweater to the ground as he and Sandy begin to shimmy and gyrate their way through the sexually-charged song. This final number signals Sandy’s complete metamorphosis. Just as she becomes the embodiment of a fantasy for Danny and the rest of her onscreen audience, so too does the character become the sexualized object of the movie audience’s gaze.

In these final scenes, Sandy is in control of her sexuality, and she appears to offer it freely to Danny. She taunts and teases him with her body, but at the same time, she makes him subservient, causing him to fall this way and that with nothing more than a shake of her leather-clad hips. Danny has no support from his peers, but Sandy is flanked by the same young women who were openly mocking her at the slumber party. The girls sing with her, dance back-up, and offer her mimed suggestions and support, guiding Sandy through her new performance of a sexualized self. While the cinematography is clearly focusing on Sandy’s body, it also highlights
Danny’s gaze, as the number is replete with medium shots of Danny’s wide-eyed excitement, his lecherous smile, and his predatory physicality as he claws and clamors after Sandy like a ravenous animal. He belongs to, what he sees as, a new version of Sandy. What the audiences see is a young woman who is finally embracing the sexually expressive side of her personality that was first revealed during the number “Hopelessly Devoted to You.” In this scene Sandy is, once again, paradoxically positioned as a young woman who has embraced her sexuality, who she truly is, while ironically, disregarding her other true self, the morally upright, pure heroine.

As is common in movies of this type, positivity and resolution abound in these final scenes. Now that Sandy has turned her back on her “good girl” image, it seems as if all the problems faced by Sandy, the T-Birds, and the Pink Ladies, have been danced away. For Danny, the end of his story arc finds him with exactly what he had wanted from the beginning of the movie, Sandy as complicit, sexually available girlfriend. As the crowd breaks into the final number, “We Go Together,” Danny and Sandy gleefully fly away in Danny’s car, waving to their friends as the screen fades to black and the lyrics “We’ll always be together,” resonate.

The end of the movie establishes a new status quo, or, in keeping with Turner’s model of the social drama, “the reintegration of the disturbed social group” (41). The annual ritual of the high school carnival is an event attended by the two factions that have been at odds: Sandy, the cause of the social Breach, and Danny and Rizzo, the two guiding forces in the group’s attempts to mend it. At the end of the movie, as these two forces come together, Sandy’s transformation brings about the Reintegration of the social structure. The power struggle has ended, the drama has reached a new point of stasis, and a solution has been presented to the issue of the Breach. No longer is there a division amongst the social group, as they have been successfully divided between two options: that which is moral and that which is carnal. Sandy, who had been
struggling with this choice, during the film, allied herself with the fun-loving, gyrating social class, in which women are willing to do whatever is necessary in the name of pleasing the men they love.

Sandy’s transformation has frequently been read as a positive assertion of sexual liberation, highly relevant to audiences of the 1970s and beyond. There are those, like Miller, who view the end of the film as an affirmation of Danny’s emancipation of Sandy. Miller observes that, “Danny Zuko . . . represents that segment of American teens who were already sexually active in the 1940s and ‘50s,” and he goes on to claim that, “it’s Danny who ultimately frees the conforming Sandy to express her sexuality without fear or shame” (30). In part, I agree with Miller’s contention that Danny spearheads the reeducation of Sandy, but I believe he does so by causing her to doubt herself, to question what she believes in, and to ultimately conform in the name of making her man happy. No matter how one wants to read the sexual politics, “THAT is the story of Grease – the story of mid-century America – the way sex was changing and the part rock and roll and cars and drive-ins played in that messy, mystical transformation” (30).

While Miller accurately identifies messages in Grease pulled straight from its cultural moment, I find it unsatisfying that there is never a conversation about alternative, unexplored narratives. Absent is any message that would suggest that Danny might seriously follow through with his halfhearted attempt to conform for Sandy, or a narrative in which Sandy turns away from Danny and looks to a life with someone who would respect her and her moral code.

For all the joy that this exuberant film has brought thousands of audiences since 1978 – and despite my own personal affection for the film – Grease is ultimately a movie about a young woman who allows her resolve to be worn down until she gives in and redefines herself in order to please her love interest and a community of her peers. The movie is also about Rizzo, a voice
for sexual openness, who pressures Sandy to embrace sexual openness as long as it aligns with the values of the ruling social group, even as she herself functions as a cautionary tale about the consequences of casual sex.

By applying Victor Turner’s concept of the Social Drama to my analysis of the film, I have sought to argue that *Grease* is also a microcosm of various movements in gender politics in the 1970s. First, there is Breach, a term that can be applied both to the introduction of Sandy, and to the introduction of more progressive publications created by and for women, such as *Ms.* magazine. Secondly, there is the Mounting Crisis, exemplified in *Grease* by the disruptive effect that Sandy’s presence and morality had on the social group that she Breached. Similarly, the work of organizations like NOW, activists like Steinem, and court cases like *Roe v. Wade* escalated that which would have been considered “crisis” by the patriarchal forces that had previously exerted control over everything from women’s magazines to women’s reproductive systems. The Redressive Actions in *Grease* were not only perpetrated by Danny and Rizzo, but by Sandy herself, as she took steps to deal with the Breach by initiating her own transformation. Redressive Actions were also taken against the women’s movement by mainstream media sources; the ABC News coverage of the Strike for Equality, The *New York Times*’ obsession with Friedan’s haircut, and Harry Reasoner’s predictions of *Ms.* failure were all attempts to deal with the Breach brought on by the work of feminists in the 1970s.

Luckily, what is missing from a parallel reading of the 1970s women’s movement and *Grease* is Reintegration. *Grease*, while offering an interesting glimpse at the gender and sexual norms of the 1970s, stands as a fictional account that is a bit more conservative than real social life. Sandy’s decision to succumb to that side of herself that allows for her to be the object of Danny’s sexual conquest, would translate as something harmful. Had the women’s movement
undergone a *Grease*-style Reintegration phase, succumbing to the pressures of a patriarchal society’s Redressive Actions, young girls would not have been able to join the Little League in 1974, women would not have been allowed into U.S. military academies in 1976, and *Roe v. Wade* would have been quickly overturned, if it had happened at all. *Grease*’s version of Reintegration would have required women of the 1970s to cast away their beliefs and rights for the sole purpose of garnering men’s approval, and it would have been a decided step backwards in the 1970s.

**Wonder Woman was Kung-Fu Fighting**

Thus far, this chapter has centered on the development of feminism in the 1970s, and on the tactics used by the women’s movement and its detractors to enhance or erase the social and political power of women. Similar maneuverings were also at play within the world of DC at large and with those charged with the character of Wonder Woman and her narrative specifically during this decade. While the sexual revolution taking place in culture afforded Wonder Woman a new level of freedom to own her identity and her desires, this character, like Sandy in *Grease*, was also subject to hyper-sexualization that often made her more of an object offered up for the male gaze, than an empowered being. Nonetheless, though the 1960s saw the deliberate stripping of Wonder Woman’s power, by the mid-1970s, readers were introduced to a version of Diana Prince who wielded far more power than ever before. In turn, by the late 1970s, Wonder Woman stories included what may be regarded as overt feminist messages.

As I demonstrated in my first chapter, the Wonder Woman of the late 1960s had become a kinder, softer version of herself, one who was constructed to exhibit both the poise and the submissive demeanor that was commonly expected of women in this period. However, with events such as the Women’s Strike for Equality heralding a time of cultural change, DC realized
that their docile Wonder Woman needed to go through a change as well. The changing social and cultural atmosphere of the 1970s demanded a different kind of representation and a different kind of performance, ones that matched the new era in which women were far more vocal than they had been before, particularly on the topics of gender roles, equality, and agency. If Wonder Woman was to stay relevant at a time when feminist thought was more prevalent than it was in the previous decade, then she would have to undergo a change.

While the early 1970s saw significant changes in the social and political sphere regarding woman’s place and power, the DC world lagged far behind. During the first years of the decade – as woman marched – the writers and artists at DC working on Wonder Women continued the trajectory of the character initiated in the 1960s. Diana’s troubled trajectory through the first years of the 1970s began, as was noted at the end of chapter one, with her powers being stripped away when she chose to stay in the Man’s World as she believed that Steve Trevor needed her. Diana’s abandonment of her power, her sisters, and her mother, for the sake of a romantic interest, points to Diana’s paradoxical construction in the 1960s, and this representation of Wonder Woman continued into the 1970s.

Despite the paradox presented by the Wonder Woman creative team, there were those who still held up the Wonder Woman of Marston’s imagination as a beacon of hope. Most notably, Gloria Steinem chose to put Wonder Woman on the cover of the first issue of Ms. in 1972, not because of the lovesick mortal that she had become, but because of the icon that Wonder Woman had once been. Of that choice, Steinem later recalled:

This was an Amazon super-hero who never killed her enemies. Instead, she converted them to a belief in equality and peace, to self-reliance and
respect for the rights of others. If villains destroyed themselves, it was through their own actions or some bloody accident. (9)

In her article, “Wonder Woman in an Era of Second Wave Feminist Critique,” Ruth McClelland-Nugent posits that using the image of Wonder Woman made sense for the magazine. She goes onto to assert that Wonder Woman “hail[ed] from a peaceful, female-centered society,” and because of that, “she represented many values that deeply resonated with Second Wave feminism” (136). Feminists such as Steinem clung to the ideals that shaped Wonder Woman’s identity in her earliest incarnations, rather than the contemporary images that DC was featuring in the pages of its comics. While Steinem was praising the “promotion of feminine cooperation” and others spoke of Wonder Woman’s “potential as a role model in a world that still judged female competence harshly” (137), DC was sending Wonder Woman around the globe, having her throw herself at potential suitors, and lashing her power, her body, and her intelligence to men. Despite the fact that Wonder Woman graced the front cover of the first issue of Ms., Joanne Edger wrote in the same issue that she did not care for the lovelorn Wonder Woman that existed during the early 1970s. Edgar took issue with the fact that the heroine was “lassoed back into conventionality” when she left Paradise Island, and her heritage, to “become the simpering romantic maiden, willing to relinquish her Amazonian birthright to a man” (quoted in McClelland 137).

How did the relinquishing of Diana’s power guide her adventures in the early 1970s? The answer to that question can be traced to choices made regarding her character in the final years of the decade before. After losing her power in Wonder Woman #179, (1968), the same issue finds her in New York City, looking for a way to help Trevor.

**Diana:** How ironic! When Steve most needs Wonder Woman, all I can offer is
plain old Diana Prince…and a poor Diana at that! (O’Neil “Wonder Woman’s Last Battle” 14)

While looking for a place to live, Diana stumbles upon a blind, Chinese martial artist named I-Ching. It is here that readers are introduced to what I will refer to as Diana’s “I-Ching Era,” which extended through the mid-1970s. It is during this time that the reader is provided with another example of Diana’s paradox. Wonder Woman is a character that is purported to be as powerful as Superman, and yet in the early 1970s she has been stripped of her power and, with the introduction of I-Ching, given a martial arts trainer, a man that must give her the power to face the trials and tribulations of the Man’s World. While Trevor’s absence may have been the catalyst for Diana’s new mission, her search for him finds her agency connected to yet another man.

The I-Ching era lasted from issue #197 (1968) until #204 (1974), and during this time, while Second Wave feminism in the larger culture brought with it messages of sexual revolution, the powerful Wonder Woman was relegated to the role of pupil. While I am not suggesting that her training with I-Ching did not empower her, on some level, I do suggest that Wonder Woman’s narrative, 1968-1974, required that her power be given to her by a man, thus making her wholly reliant on that man for her survival.

With the conclusion of the I-Ching in 1974, Julius Schwartz took over the title’s editing responsibilities. In some respects, it can be argued that Schwartz was responsible for imbuing Wonder Woman stories with more “explicitly feminist vocabulary” (McClelland139) that aligned with the historical moment. His reimagining of the character started with her costume: Schwartz jettisoned the white jumpsuits and martial arts lessons indicative of the I-Ching, and brought back the iconic imagery with which readers identified. Moreover, a perhaps more to the
point, not only was Diana once again clad in the traditional Wonder Woman garb, but Schwartz made Amazonians history a central component of the narrative and returned Diana’s super powers to her. While these moves are rightly viewed as somewhat progressive, Schwartz, as did writer Dennis O’Neil during the I-Ching era, continued to shackle the heroine’s power to patriarchy.

This is evident from Schwartz’s first issue, *Wonder Woman* #212 (1974), when Wonder Woman, spurred by an odd loss of memory, goes to the otherwise all-male Justice League for help. After examining her, Batman explains:

**Batman:** As near as we can determine, Diana, there’s nothing wrong with your memory. Except that you have no recollection of the months you spent without super-powers! (Wein “The Man Who Mastered…” 7)

In light of this discovery, Diana decides to leave the League, believing that she can no longer serve as a member of the super team; she contends that her memory loss may cause her to forget an assignment “during some life-and-death mission” (8). What follows are several panels featuring Batman, Superman, The Flash, and The Green Lantern, pleading with Wonder Woman to reconsider her position on the team.

**Green Lantern:** That’s absurd Diana! You were one of our founding members—one of the most powerful!

**Flash:** C’mon Wonder Woman—the JLA needs you!

**Superman:** Isn’t there any way we can convince you to change your mind? (Wein “The Man Who…” 8)

In this exchange readers are invited to witness a rare occurrence in DC comics: its greatest male heroes begging Wonder Woman, while acknowledging her power, her agency, to help them in
their mission to protect humankind. While Diana of the 1960s jealously pined for the affection that Trevor showed her alter ego, and was often limited to the role of object of romantic conquest, Schwartz’s Wonder Woman is recognized as an integral part in the protecting of human life. Acknowledgments such as these fall more in line with the positive female representations that were being sought by Second Wave Feminism; and yet as the narrative unfolds, once again, Wonder Woman’s power is muted by the ways in which she is allowed to put her powers on display. As Diana considers how she can continue her work as a member of the Justice League, she devises a plan:

**Wonder Woman**: I’d like the Justice League to monitor my next twelve adventures! If I succeed in those tasks—to your satisfaction—yes, I will rejoin! (8)

Thus, from Wonder Woman #213 (1974) to Wonder Woman #222 (1976), the so-called “Twelve Labors” issues, Diana engages in her world-saving adventures, all the while sharing space with a member of the Justice League supervising her.

While there is no definitive answer to the question of who made the decision to take Wonder Woman’s adventures in this direction, sales were undoubtedly one of the biggest factors in the changing of direction and of the creative team. With Schwartz’s team in place, DC’s desire to increase sales could have translated into their wanting to pair Wonder Woman with popular heroes such as Batman, Superman and Green Lantern. Such a case would explain why DC chose to make such a move. And yet the move raises another question: could Schwartz infuse his stories with the feminist messages that were prevalent in the mid-1970s, while having Diana voyeuristically evaluated by possibly scene-stealing, heroes?

The answer to that question is unsurprisingly ambiguous. While Diana’s stories
beginning in the mid-1970s did not show her proclaiming her feminist beliefs outright, Schwartz and the *Wonder Woman* writers often used tertiary characters to highlight Wonder Woman’s feminist messages. For example, in *Wonder Woman* #214 (1974), whose cover featured the banner “A New Novel Featuring Super-Heroine Number One!”, Green Lantern, while doing his duty to report on whether Wonder Woman was responsible enough to rejoin the Justice League, speaks of Diana’s as a feminist, as he spies on her from a distance. Diana, while talking with United Nations diplomat, Lord Rosewater, recommends that he dine at “Hank’s Pub”:

**Diana:** It’s an Old English restaurant modeled after Henry VIII’s court, owned by a man named Henry Tudor. Here, I’ll get the door.

**Green Lantern:** That’s our Wonder Woman, all right…the Woman’s Libber opening doors for gentlemen!

**Lord Rosewater:** I do wish you’d let me hold the door for you, just once, Diana. (Maggin “Wish” 6-7).

While a seemingly slight inclusion, this exchange between Diana and Rosewater is clearly Schwartz’s attempt to integrate Diana into a cultural moment during which women were beginning to disregard traditional gestures, such as men holding the door open for women. While some still consider the gesture an act of kindness, the same gesture can be viewed as a patriarchal push to create a culture in which women are viewed as vulnerable, in need of watching over by men. Here it is evident that Schwartz and his team, in the mid-1970s, was working to allow Wonder Woman an opportunity to highlight her own feminist agenda.

As the issue continues, Lord Rosewater is called to the Crisis Bureau, where Diana works, and is told that a bomber is headed towards Soviet airspace and cannot be recalled due to a technical difficulty. The Soviets informed the gathered delegates that if the US drops bombs on
Soviet Russia that “an uncontrollable robot defense will retaliate”, adding that “all civilization – all human life – will lie in ruins!” (Maggin “Wish” 13). As “women at the Crisis Bureau are the last to be told whenever real crisis comes up” (13), Diana is forced to eavesdrop, outside of the conference room, to garner information on the impending, unstoppable, attack on foreign land. As the story nears its conclusion, it is revealed that all members of the Justice League are on assignment, “mysteriously enough, communications lines are down at strategic points all over the world,” (13), and Green Lantern’s ring is not working; Diana is alone in her task to ensure that the nuclear bombs do not land on Soviet soil. Schwartz’s depiction of the “man’s world” that Diana has been tasked to educate and protect, mirrors the sensibilities found in our own as she observes silently, while the patriarchy (all of the delegates involved are men) go about making, in this case, decisions that “could spell the death of the planet” (15). As Diana’s adventure unfolds, Green Lantern narrates:

Green Lantern: I could only sit by helplessly and tune the mental radio in on Wonder Woman—finally contacting her eight miles above the ground. 
I watched the gutsy lady soar head-on at the runaway bomber…and, 
heaven help me, I saw her climb out onto the wing of her plane, traveling twice the speed of sound! (Maggin “Wish” 17)

While seeing Wonder Woman perform impossible feats was not something new, the 1950s and 60s never offered a glimpse at other well-known superheroes being in awe of her abilities. The story ends with Green Lantern informing the League that Diana’s power was such that she had proven, once again, that she was ready to rejoin her fellow heroes. Again, Wonder Woman may not have been quoting feminists writings while she was lassoing a bomber, but even in her exchanges with Lord Rosewater we see the some vestige of feminist sensibilities of the 1970s,
shining through in regards to something as simple as a door being held open for her.

This Schwartz-led return to power is exemplified again in *Wonder Woman* #219 (1975). Diana is working at the U.N. Crisis Bureau, where she discovers a plot to kidnap Irish Nationalist Bonita Doolin (a fictional version of Irish Socialist Bernadette Devlin), Betty Jo Kane (the DC universe version of professional tennis player Billie Jean King), and other prominent feminists. Diana is tasked with saving these feminist speakers before they are scheduled to appear at the “World Conference of Feminist Women” (Pasko “World” 4). While Wonder Woman is saving the feminists of the world, Ralph Dibny, the Justice League’s Elongated Man, and his wife Sue follow her lead. They soon discover an establishment called “Consciousness III Salon: Beauty Salons for the Liberated Woman.” As Ralph and his wife approach the establishment, writer Martin Pasko explicitly points to Wonder Woman’s feminist ideals, without having Wonder Woman state them herself:

**Ralph:** I thought duding yourself up for a man was supposed to be sexist—so there’s no such thing as a beauty parlor for liberated women!

**Sue:** This place doesn’t give a hang about what men think is beautiful, dear—it teaches women to make up to please themselves.

**Ralph:** Sounds like a crock to me… (Pasko “World” 7).

Sentiments like this, made by tertiary characters, signals a change in Wonder Woman’s messages, and portray her far differently than she was earlier in the decade, and in the 1960s. As discussed above, there was a desire, on some level, to prominently display other popular superheroes within the pages of Wonder Woman, but by putting specific rules on the heroes that spied on Diana, for all intents and purposes, making the voyeurs present, and at the same time, invisible, Schwartz is, be it intentionally or unintentionally, inverting the traditional role that
women have played in our real world. That is to say, Schwartz allows us to watch as the male members of the Justice League are delegated to the roles of silent, uninfluential, observer reversing the roles that have, many times, been reserved for women.

By the time that *Grease* debuted in 1978, the “new” Wonder Woman introduced in the later 1960s and nurtured through the first years of the decade was gone, and the changes to her personality and her goals were significant. Schwartz and his team resurrected Trevor, but they did away with the dishonest, philandering suitor quality that had defined his character. McClelland-Nugent notes, “Gone was the Silver Age trickster…oblivious to his secretary Diana Prince. Such portrayals would have been inconsistent with popular media associations of feminism, singlehood, and woman's fulfillment” (141). Not only was Steve changed, but Wonder Woman’s affection for the man was also tempered, as is made clear in *Wonder Woman #223* (1976). After Steve is resurrected by Aphrodite in order to test Wonder Woman’s skills, he longs for physical intimacy when Diana drops him off at his hotel:

**Steve:** Please don’t go…yet! It’s been so long since we’ve been together…we have to…well…get to know each other all over again!

**Diana:** No, Steve…I’ve been on the go non-stop since my vacation from the U.N. started…and it’s late…and—corny though it sounds—

I’m getting a headache!

**Steve:** Uh…yeah…right! (Pasko “Versus” 8)

Granted, Diana does not suggest that things have changed for her, or that she needs to put her emotional wellbeing over her desire for intimacy, but she is no longer defined by Trevor. To be sure, at this point, she exudes independence never before seen. Diana’s independence and her
ownership of her sexuality, are not confound by her constant pursuit for a relationship, even when the prospect of romance presents itself.

As these examples make clear, the Wonder Woman of the mid and late 1970s was a welcome change from the past. Readers like Robin Smith from Dayton, Ohio, took positive note:

Robin: Long live Princess Diana! The symbol of independent womanhood, crusader of human rights, champion of justice, model of mercy, tower of strength, and fountain of kindness. And long live DC, who has brought back Wonder Woman in all her glory! “Long live Princess Diana! The symbol of independent womanhood, crusader of human rights, champion of justice, model of mercy, tower of strength, and fountain of kindness.” (Conway “Secret” 18)

Indeed, this rendering of the heroine is the “Golden Age proto-feminist that Steinem et al had praised” (McClelland-Nugent 142). But as the company’s history has already proven, DC has consistently displayed a tendency to revert back to old ways. As I move into discussing Wonder Woman in the 1980s in the next chapter, I will argue that DC did not adhere to the positive changes they had made in the late 1970s, but instead participated in a backlash against women by drastically changing Diana once again.

Closing the Chapter on the 1970s

In the 1960s gender roles shifted as The Feminine Mystique shed a light on the dissatisfied housewife. As second wave feminism blossomed in the 1970s, the call for gender equality hit a fever pitch. Women were being heard, whether or not those that disparaged them liked what was being said. Attempts to silence feminist activists did not just come from men, but from woman as well, particularly those traditionalists of both sexes who refused to acknowledge
the existence of inequality. But despite the cynics, feminist activists such as Gloria Steinem and Kate Millet were making great strides to ensure that the feminist message was not only widely dispersed, but also readily available. While many detractors did not subscribe to the feminist message, feminist writings influenced much of the literature and popular culture of the day, from the pages of *Ms.* magazine to comic books to the silver screen, though the message in popular culture forums was frequently diluted as writers and artists continued to pander to their more traditional audiences. In this regard, *Grease* may be thought of as a film that, in its own way, did destabilize notions of traditional sexual stereotypes, particularly those found in the 1950s. What cannot be ignored, however, is the film’s objectification of its female lead for the purpose of fantasy fulfillment, or its troubling definition of sexual freedom. As Sandy is pressured into becoming a sexual object to be gazed upon, and as Rizzo lords her own sexuality over the virginal Sandy, there is more than a hint of patriarchy in the air. Sandy’s dilemma is one that can be applied to the larger cultural moment of the 1970s, as is evident when the film is analyzed as a Social Drama, tracking the ways it mirrors the movements of feminism during the decade. In this regard, Sandy’s place in *Grease* is not unlike Diana’s place within the pages of *Wonder Woman* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the late 1960s, Wonder Woman was made to look weak and emotional; as she moved through the 1970s, she became an object of sexual desire. It was not until the mid and late 1970s that both Diana and Wonder Woman moved away from their fixations with relationships. Finally, their stories bore some semblance of a feminist message, even if Diana and Wonder Woman were not the ones to tout these principles directly.

While there are several parallels to the ways in which traditional gender norms hampered some of the agency and freedoms that the powerful female body gained in the 1960s and the 1970s, the differences are noteworthy. I argue that while the 1960s was a time to question the
role of the domesticated American woman, the 1970s was a decade that, while still interrogating the traditional roles of women in the home and workplace, also brought about significant changes in the conversations surrounding female sexuality, reproductive rights, and gender equality. While these changes are perhaps not as revolutionary as some might hope, they nonetheless should not be glossed or forgotten.

The feminist’s continuing struggle to change and disengage from the troubling gender binaries of the past raged on in the 1980s. In the next chapter, I explore that decade as a time of patriotic performance, consumerism, and big budget musicals, with prominent heroines once again being rendered as both absent and present, as entertainers and comic book heroines had to take on particular personas to garner male approval. Journeying from the patriarchal presidency of Ronald Reagan, to the end of feminism’s second wave, and the works of Andrew Lloyd Weber, my study of the shifts in gender politics and the deepening backlash against women will culminate in an investigation into a new, violent era in the Wonder Woman mythos.
CHAPTER III: PATRIARCHY AND THE PRESIDENCY (1980s)

The conflict between Wonder Woman’s sexual power and the way that power is regulated by patriarchy is an impulse that carried forward, from the 1970s into the 1980s. During this decade, Ronald Reagan and the powerful religious conservative groups who supported him had a significant impact on the still-burgeoning woman’s revolution; as such, their influence on women’s rights and their concomitant representation is a key focus of this chapter. In sum, I will argue that during the 1980s, many popular entertainments, including the representation of Wonder Woman in comics, continued to simultaneously support and subvert the patriarchal hegemony. I hold that a study of the ways in which such representations were created, marketed, and consumed during this decade reveals the depth and breadth of the reach of that vision of the world. Though this paradox of support and subversion was felt across culture, I have chosen to open this chapter by focusing on one key figure who embodied it for the culture writ large. More precisely, as entry into a discussion of this paradox – the simultaneous fight against and fellowship with the patriarchy – I turn to the early career of pop superstar Madonna.

In brief, I will argue that the construction/performance of Madonna’s persona and the marketing of her sexuality effectively demonstrate how an ostensibly empowered woman in the 1980s could fight against an oppressive system of sexual control while, at the same time, reinforcing gender norms and conservative values. Madonna was during this time both a sexually empowered entertainer, and a purveyor of traditional notions of womanhood. In many respects, Madonna’s persona fed male fantasies, not unlike the construction of Grease’s Sandy: she was a virginal heroine who, within the structure of the male fantasy, was doomed to perform the role of whore.
In the section that follows my analysis of Madonna, I will briefly track how traditional gender roles were also manifest on the theatrical stage in the 1980s. Here I will use the wildly popular musical, *Les Misérables*, as a case study as I examine the connection between female agency and the propping up of patriarchal control. Productions of this musical theatre interpretation of Victor Hugo’s classic 19th century novel frequently are praised for their extravagant sets, rousing musical numbers, and sentimental storytelling. Often overlooked in these affirming evaluations of the piece, however, is the treatment of the female characters in the story, who serve primarily as powerless, one-dimensional plot devices. Whether they are objects to conquer or coerce, I argue that the female characters in *Les Misérables* are little more than products used to empower men. In this regard, *Les Misérables* is the very embodiment of what Susan Faludi argues occurred in the political arena in the 1980s: “the absence of real women [. . .] is a hallmark” of the decade’s backlash sentiment against the strides made in the 1960s and 1970s with regard to the sexual revolution and equal rights (93). In short, I argue that while *Les Misérables* attempts to offer a “realistic” take on the plight of women in 19th century France, it falls well short of this goal by creating female characters who lack depth and dimension.

Taking a step back from my case studies of Madonna and *Les Misérables*, I will then go on to examine and explain why these messages of patriarchal control were so prevalent during the 1980s. To do so, I turn to a consideration of the larger historical context, and investigate what I refer to as President Ronald Reagan’s “performance of patriarchal nationalism,” as well as his working relationship with Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, I posit that Reagan’s primary goal with this performance was not only to promote a strong, patriotic image, both at home and abroad, but also to ensure that his administration, and, by extension, his nation, succeeded in upholding the virtue of ideals that he
held dear – ideals that were not in line with the freedoms that many American women fought to embrace during the 1980s. Reagan set out to perform patriarchal nationalism primarily through displays of America’s military and financial power, but also by lionizing traditional visions of womanhood and condemning those views that were more progressive. To aid Reagan financially, politically, and religiously, came the Moral Majority, an organization founded by the evangelical Christian Jerry Falwell in 1979, designed to give conservative Christians a platform and a voice within the political arena. The marriage of these two political and cultural superpowers, Reagan and Falwell, promoted a sense of patriarchal nationalism that came to define the national politics of this period, simultaneously ushering in a backlash against the fight for reproductive and equal rights.

Finally, with these case studies in place, I will conclude the chapter by returning to my primary focus: Wonder Woman. Here, I will discuss both the changes to the comic book industry and form in the 1980s at large, and how those changes, coupled with the backlash against women within culture, changed the medium’s most famous heroine.

Like a Virginial Material Girl: Madonna and the Performance of Female Sexuality

As I will examine in more depth further on in this chapter, the Reagan era brought with it visions of rebirth, power, and moral uprightness, ideals that found their way into various aspects of popular culture. Whether it was Chrysler attempting to brandish Bruce Springsteen’s unrelentingly popular “Born in the USA” in the hopes of selling cars, or publisher Malcolm Forbes’ two million-dollar seventieth birthday party, wealth and consumerism were on obvious display in the 1980s. Reagan may have come in as a strict father, but he also performed proud, patriotic benefactor, teaching the nation that the American dream, which was available to all who worked hard, came with exorbitant amounts of wealth. One can hardly talk about influential
personas of the 1980s, or the impact of patriarchy and wealth on the popular culture of the decade, without referencing Madonna. While Madonna was (and is) an entertainer who would affect the world of popular culture in a way that few female artists ever had, she also serves as an example of how an artist can both embrace and push back against the patriarchy in the name of popularity and profit. As a savvy and shrewd performer whose work was driven, at least in part, by the patriarchy of the Reagan Era, Madonna paradoxically asserted her power and capitalized on traditional ideas about gender and sexuality.

In order to understand Madonna’s performance of power, it is important to first understand the state of the industry into which she entered. Sexism in the music industry was still rampant as the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, highly evident not only in business practices that frequently disadvantaged female artists, but also in the lyrics of many popular songs, the imagery that often accompanied the music, and the dehumanizing ways in which female fans were frequently treated. In 1977, for example, billboard advertisements for the Rolling Stones went up around the country, portraying a scantily clad, bruised woman, legs spread wide to accommodate the band’s picture, with arms raised above her head as if in ecstasy. The text that accompanied the image was clearly meant to suggest a woman’s handwriting, and the message that was splayed about the billboard with a flourish proclaimed, “I’m ‘Black and Blue’ from the Rolling Stones—and I love it!” Though the group Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) quickly denounced the billboards, this short-lived advertising campaign nonetheless highlights the cavalier attitude towards sexual violence that was prevalent in popular music at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. The early 1980s also saw the troublesome advent of the “rock supergroupie.” As Andi Zeisler argues in her study *Feminism and Pop Culture*, women who identified as “groupies” in the 1980s were typically part of a much more
lavish, theatrical rock-and-roll generation than their predecessors, one where “rock music itself came to signify a dangerous romance in which guitars were played like women, groupies were adopted as muses, mother figures, and of course, sexual rewards for restless, road-weary musicians” (83). In sum, by the early 1980s, the supergroupie “had become as accepted a part of rock’s status quo as leather pants and whiskey” (83). It was within this world of misogynistic representation and objectification that Madonna would begin to make her mark at the dawn of the decade.

Madonna’s was born 1958, in Bay City, Michigan. Christened Madonna Louise Ciccone, she found success at a relatively young age. In 1983, at the age of 25, Madonna released her self-titled debut album, which Allmusic.com editor Stephen Thomas Erlewine claims fundamentally altered the dance music landscape: “It’s been easy to overlook that Madonna began her career as a disco diva in an era that didn’t have disco divas” (Erlewine). While Erlewine’s statement overlooks the other disco divas of the time, including the hugely popular Gloria Gaynor, Anita Ward, and Sister Sledge, it is nonetheless true that Madonna altered the course of the popular music. For Erlewine, Madonna’s debut album “had a huge role in popularizing dance music as a popular music again, crashing through the door that Michael Jackson opened with Thriller.”

Madonna’s debut album, which went platinum five times, would be just the beginning of her establishing a central place in popular music history. To be sure, with its release, she “set the standard for dance-pop for the next 20 years” (Erlewine). In May 2015, more than thirty years after the release of the eponymous Madonna, the singer released the single “Ghosttown,” and with it achieved her forty-fifth number one single on the Billboard Dance/Club songs charts. In marking that event, Forbes’ Hugh McIntyre described Madonna’s milestone as “an unmatched accomplishment, and it gives her the distinction of having more number one songs on a single
chart than any other artist in history” (McIntyre). It was her first album, however, that would remain Madonna’s crowning long-term success, as she “generated sales for Time Warner of over $1.2 billion in the first decade of her career” (Spender 1408).

Madonna may rightfully be regarded as a once in a generation, industry-defining artist; she would become what CNN correspondent Stephanie Busan called “the most influential female recording artist of all time” (Busan). While her place as a central figure in the history of popular music is secure, I am nonetheless compelled to ask: Did Madonna’s career, particularly in the early 80s, find her opposing conservative ideologies, or reifying traditional roles for women?

There is little doubt that, from the very start of her career, she established herself as an entertainer who opposed the conservative and religious messages touted by the likes of Reagan and the Moral Majority. At the same time, however, Madonna’s name and lyrics offer to audiences a chaste persona who longs to be viewed and used as a sexual object.

Before embarking on an exploration of the duality of Madonna’s representation of female sexuality, it is important to note that the singer’s image was not entirely her own creation. As numerous scholars have argued, a popular music star is a constructed entity, an amalgam of lawyers, producers, and advertisers, all working together to develop the performer’s talent in a way that will lead to monetary profit and, in the best of cases, critical success. Thus, it can be assumed that Madonna’s achievements, particularly at the start of her career, were the result of efforts made by a team of people, charged with the task of helping her to construct and maintain a particular image.

Madonna’s persona (or personas, as she was famous for her shape-shifting skills), and ability to keep up with the changing temperatures of popular culture, served her well in the 1980s, despite what Zeisler accurately points to as something of a confusing message:
Madonna donned a guise—winsome street urchin, hard-eyed peep-show dancer, Marilyn Monroe manqué, guilt-plagued Catholic girl, torch singer, shameless libertine—delighting and frustrating viewers who couldn’t understand whether these personas were put-on or pretension or both. (86)

No matter the costume she donned, Madonna’s success within the world of music brought her a great deal of attention, not only in the realm of popular music but beyond. That is not to suggest that other women who scored great success in the 1980s through the medium of popular music—including Tina Turner, Annie Lennox, and Pat Benatar—did not make notable contributions to the music landscape of the 1980s; but Madonna’s influence stands apart from theirs and others as her impact moved beyond the arena of music in ways that few others did. As many scholars of popular culture have noted, what stood the center or Madonna’s appeal and influence was her protean nature, i.e., the seemingly endless parade of characters she chose to play. Throughout the course of the 1980s, she never stopped changing her image, and in turn, she constantly prompted change within the fashion industry. In their study, *The 1980s*, Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart point to the connection between Madonna’s ever-changing fashion and her music sales:

> Madonna influenced styles in so many ways via her music videos. Her changing styles with each new album caused her to be called “a chameleon,” however by decade’s end, the public and Madison Avenue were very aware that her style alterations were part of her own marketing savvy. (70)

It is, of course, difficult to know how much agency Madonna actually had when it came to dictating the correlation between album releases and stylistic/image transformations. What is clear, however, is that no matter what stage of transformation she was in, she was rebelling against traditional norms. In this regard, then, it seems one must answer with a resounding “yes”
in response to the question as to whether or not she had power; Madonna’s power was manifest in her rebellion against traditional, gendered ideologies. It is in this that Madonna can be seen as one with a great deal of power, albeit perhaps somewhat conditional during the very early part of her career. For example, when she first burst onto the scene in 1982 with her debut single “Everybody,” she played the role of “part guttersnipe, part mall chick” (Batchelor 70). This Madonna, a particularly youthful performance of rebellion, was not interested in the order to be found in symmetry of style, as was evidenced in the multiple color tones in her hair, her makeup, mismatched boots, dangling earrings, and torn gloves, all used to accent the short skirts and the tight, oftentimes torn, tights.

Madonna’s style changed dramatically in 1984 with the release of her second album, Like a Virgin. I contend that it was at this point that she also began to more fully bring her powerful rebellions to the forefront of her work. In terms of her image, it was during this phase that her focus moved from youth and rebellion to an odd mixture of virginal innocence and overt sexuality. Madonna debuted her new image for a national audience as part of the first MTV Video Music Awards in 1984. During this broadcast, she “appeared in a restyled wedding gown with veil – the dress hem was cut mid-thigh, and outfitted with black lingerie and a large crucifix” (Batchelor 70). As had Grease’s Sandy the decade before, Madonna was, on the one hand, presenting herself during this performance as something pure, catering to certain heterosexual male fantasies as she paraded around the stage singing, “like a virgin, touched for the very first time” (“Madonna”). Unlike Sandy, however, whose character began as a symbol of conservative values, “Madonna overturned these conventions by placing herself center-stage, and projecting an overtly sexual image that mixed female fantasy and parody” (Spender 1408). Madonna’s image may have suggested virginity, but like Rizzo she also performed sexually
liberated woman who included in her performances multiple suggestions of sexual awakening. *Entertainment Weekly* columnist Jim Farber suggests that the fashion and music that came about because of *Like a Virgin* contributed in upping the “Madonna/whore ante” (Farber). While I do not care for Faber’s label, he is correct in that the release of *Like a Virgin* put Madonna’s sexually awakened persona in the spotlight.

When speaking to the concept of virgin versus whore, I am referring to Sigmund Freud’s theory of the psychological complex by which certain men can only view women as the traditional, pure Madonna figure or a woman with loose morals who engages in frequent sexual acts. While Freud’s ideas are not without significant problems (many of which have been systematically unpacked by feminist thinkers), his virgin/whore model clarifies some of the gender stereotypes this study is examining. Given this, it is important to note that my critique does not stand as an attempt to label Madonna a whore or virgin. Rather, it is to suggest that Madonna both fought against and willingly catered to a specific representation of female sexuality that trafficked in those labels. As all entertainers do, Madonna benefited from the creation of a persona, representing herself as a beacon of sexual liberation and empowerment in order to build her fame.

The personas that have become such an integral part of Madonna’s career, whether they be sexual object, deviant, or even revolutionary, were crafted in her childhood. In his book, *The Art of the Seductress: Techniques of the Great Seductresses from Biblical Times to the Postmodern Era*, Arthur Berger cites an article in *Interview* magazine in which Madonna speaks to the roots of her sexually charged persona.

**Madonna:** …it was a private joke between my girlfriend and me, that we were floozies, because she used to get it from her mother all the time, too…


Interviewer: So somewhere you did like the floozy look.

Madonna: Only because we knew that our parents didn’t like it. We thought it was fun. We got dressed to the nines. We got bras and stuffed them so our breasts were over-large and wore really tight sweaters. [...] we were sweater girl floozies. We wore tons of lipstick and really badly applied makeup and huge beauty marks and did our hair up like Tammy Wynette.” (Quoted in Berger 111)

It is clear that Madonna understood the sexual power that she wielded and, despite the fact that she initially used it as a means of rebelling against her parents’ strictures, it ultimately morphed into a performance designed to portray her as a sexually provocative being.

The music and style of Madonna’s persona during the Like a Virgin phase sent two very clear messages to her fans. First, she showed them that she was a woman interested in reclaiming sexual control, riding the wave of sexual revolution that was sparked in the 1960s and continued to gain momentum during the 1970s. The second message, however, speaks to a woman who was capitalizing on the image of the innocent, submissive woman on the verge of her first sexual encounter. In previous chapters, I have offered examples of the objectification of fictional female characters, such as Barbara Eden’s Jeannie and Olivia Newton-John’s Sandy, arguing that, in such representations, women were used as objects of male sexual fantasy and had little to no control over the aesthetic or cinematographic choices that were made to guide the eye of the audience. Madonna, on the other hand, knowingly wielded her sexual objectification strategically, and to great success. Still, the entertainer’s success hinged on her ability and willingness to embrace a sinner/saint persona, and in this another paradoxical construction of female empowerment may be found. Madonna was a powerful emerging force in the 1980s, commanding her sexuality in a very particular and non-traditional way. In order to ascend the
heights of fame and fortune, however, she capitalized on established gender norms and played to the heterosexual male gaze, essentially rendering herself far less powerful as a symbol for sexual revolution and liberation from male control and desire.

This duality is clearly evident in the video for the song “Material Girl,” the second single from *Like a Virgin*, released in November 1984. The song, a synthesizer-heavy number with robotic voices that spoke to the value of material possessions and wealth in lieu of romance, was another hit, not only landing in Billboard’s top five (Anderson), but surpassing other offerings on the dance song charts (Trust). The music video was an homage to Marilyn Monroe’s performance of “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” from the 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. In both the music video and the movie that serves as its inspiration, handsome, tuxedo-clad male dancers pursue a young woman, dressed in a pink gown. The cat and mouse narrative in Madonna’s video has her celebrating that, “the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mister Right” (“Material Girl”).

What stands out in this video visually, is that Madonna not only controls the fantasies of the men, but she also controls their gazes. She is seen pushing their faces this way and that, while slapping their leering looks away with a collapsible fan, actions not unlike Sandy’s manipulations of Danny during “You’re the One That I Want.” The video’s aesthetic tells a visual story, one of Madonna’s power and sexual agency. The song’s lyrics, on the other hand, reinforce gender stereotypes concerning what women value.

Some boys try and some boys lie but
I don't let them play (no way)
Only boys who save their pennies
Make my rainy day. (“Material Girl”)
All of the song’s other verses contain the same sentiment: while Madonna’s character is content to be pursued by men, the only men that are allowed to play with her are men who have money. The driving sentiment behind the verses is, of course, more fully explained in the chorus.

'Cause we're living in a material world
And I am a material girl
You know that we are living in a material world
And I am a material girl. (“Material Girl”)

While Madonna did not write the song – it was written by Peter Brown and Robert Rams – she is, once again, taking on the persona of whore, a woman who invites the gaze of men, but can only be obtained by a man who is wealthy enough. As the song lyrics and the music video make clear, Madonna’s “material girl” persona has the power of choice – she can engage or turn away men without explanation or apology. On the other hand, the song celebrates the use of sex as currency, suggesting that the singer’s body is a luxury object she will bestow upon the highest bidder.

This analysis raises the question: Was Madonna’s message one that, in fact, sought to reclaim sexual power and agency? I argue that it was, as she was clearly an entertainer whose message sought to conflict with Reagan’s conservative messages of the day. But I also contend that her success was built, at least partially, on a foundation that reinforced limiting stereotypes about gender and sexuality. That said, I do not overlook the significant strides that Madonna made during the 1980s and beyond as a female recording artist. Her powerful voice and actions within the world of popular culture paved the way for a new era of female artists, many of whom point to Madonna as having been an influential force within their own careers, from pop artists of the time like Debbie Gibson (“Q&A: Debbie Gibson”), to more contemporary artists such as
Beyoncé Knowles, who suggests that when it comes to Madonna there “aren’t enough of those [independent] women” (Corner). In sum, then, I posit that Madonna’s performance in the early 1980s was one that gave her power, but at the same time rendered that power conditional.

There are a number of similarities between the paradoxical construction of Madonna’s power in the 1980s and the constructions of power this study pointed to in the 1960s and the 1970s. In the 1960’s female power did not go hand in hand with female agency, as is evidenced by an evaluation of the power structures on *Bewitched*. Sam was given a great deal of power, but that power was viewed negatively and controlled by Darren’s decree that Sam was not allowed to use her powers. In the 1970’s, Sandy in *Grease* an independent woman whose power is muted until she embraces the lifestyle that her romantic interest, Danny Zuko, is constantly encouraging her to accept. In the 1980s, while Madonna’s power and the reclaiming of sexual agency, or at least the performance of these tenants, is not connected to any man, she represents a paradox in that many of the messages in her music are aligned to traditional sexual and gender norms.

*Les Misérables: Flimsy Props for the Patriarchy*

Paradoxical messages concerning female agency were infused within the most successful entertainments in the 1980s, not only on the Billboard charts, but also on Broadway stages. For example, *Les Misérables*, one of the most critically acclaimed shows of the decade, featured unforgettable female protagonists whose power was nonetheless stripped from them by the controlling hand of patriarchy. The importance of *Les Misérables* to my study is twofold. First, its messages echo the conservative ideologies that the Reagan era was founded upon, messages that were, and remain, detrimental to women and to the cause of feminism. Secondly, the success of *Les Misérables*, like the success of *Grease*, suggests that these ideologies, while originating in a 19th century French novel, still resonated with American audiences. As feminist scholar Ednie
Kaeh Garrison posits, an examination of the success of *Les Misérables* offers insight into the social consciousness of the 1980s (24-25).

Premiering in 1980 at the Palais des Sports, an athletics arena in Paris, *Les Misérables* would go on to become the one of the “world’s most popular musical[s],” seen by more than “70 million people in 44 countries and in 22 languages around the globe” (“Les Misérables”). Critics have called the show a testament to “heroic human commitment” (Hummler); Frank Rich in the *New York Times* raved, “If anyone doubts that the contemporary musical theater can flex its atrophied muscles and yank an audience right out of its seats, he need look no further than the Act I finale of ‘Les Misérables’” (Rich). The plot of *Les Misérables*, based on Victor Hugo’s 1862 novel of the same name, revolves around Jean Valjean, a peasant in early 19th century France, who served nineteen years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread. Valjean’s story is one of redemption. As he is chased by his nemesis, the police officer Javert, he also raises Cosette, the child he adopts when her mother, Fantine, passes away. The story of these characters is set against the backdrop of 1830s Paris, complete with young rebels attempting to rise up against the French monarchy. For the purposes of this study, my interest in *Les Misérables* lies in how the principle female characters, Cosette, Fantine, and Eponine, are drawn. More precisely, I will interrogate the ways in which they prop up the already-powerful patriarchy rather than seeking to empower themselves or one another. As my analysis will show, throughout the musical, a series of incidents place these female characters fully at the mercy of patriarchal forces.

The first of these women, Fantine, is a mother working in a factory to support her illegitimate child, who is being raised by an innkeeper in the country. Fantine’s position at the factory is under constant attack from both the foreman and the other women who work with her.
These women, concerned that the foreman’s attraction to Fantine will give her an unfair advantage, sing of Fantine’s alleged promiscuity in the song, “At the End of the Day”:

**Girl 5:** At the end of the day

She’s the one who began it!

There’s a kid that she’s hiding

In some little town.

There’s a man she has to pay

You can bet how she picks up the extra.

You can bet she’s earning her keep

Sleeping around.

And the boss wouldn’t like it! (Boublil 11)

Once the jealous shop foreman discovers that the unmarried Fantine has a child, he dismisses her for what he perceives as a moral offense. Desperate, Fantine appeals to the mayor and factory owner, Valjean, for help, but to no avail.

Ultimately, Fantine is fired because of her lack of connection to a man, and because the revelation that she is not a virgin wounds the foreman’s fragile pride; as the other women taunt him, “She’s been laughing at you while she’s having her men!” he spits out the angry accusation, “You play a virgin in the light / But need no urgin’ in the night!” (11). Fantine’s predicament is based in historical reality, as an unwed mother in nineteenth century France would likely be widely regarded as a blight on society. In her book, *French Feminism in the 19th Century*, Claire Moses points to the realism of Fantine’s plight, and to the popular opinion that “single women [were] merely a symptom of a disease brought on by the insufficiency of men’s wages, which made marriage sometimes infeasible” (177). While a consideration of the difficulties that unwed
mothers faced during the nineteenth century adds an element of realism and social awareness to *Les Misérables*, Fantine’s plotline functions primarily as a narrative stepping stone for Valjean along his path to heroism.

Fantine, with no money or prospects, resorts to prostitution to survive. During the number “I Dreamed a Dream,” Fantine sings about her past, acknowledging that she was a foolish young woman driven by, as musical theatre scholars Joe Deer and Rocca Dal Vera suggest, a “naïve hope and belief in love and God” (175). Throughout the song, it is revealed that the young Fantine found love during a particular summer, only to have her suitor leave her once autumn arrived. Soon she realizes that the love she believed she had freely given was, in fact, taken away: “He took my childhood in his stride” (Boublil 13). Fantine laments the folly of her ways and the time that she wasted with this man, but in the very next stanza reveals that she still clings to threads of her hope for her lover’s return; she sings: “And still I dream he'll come to me / That we will live the years together” (13). While the lyrics make clear that Fantine longs for a man that is wrong for her, the reason for this lament could be up for question. One reading of these stanzas might suggest that Fantine longs for the catalyst of her misery and financial ruin. In this Fantine, like *Grease*’s Sandy, would be content to look past her lover’s misdeeds if only he would return to her. I would argue that a more historically accurate reading would reveal that the lyrics of “I Dreamed a Dream” are not so much driven by love, but by Fantine’s desire to live. The reality of Fantine’s situation is such that without a patriarch her life is, quite literally, over. Both readings present us with Fantine, a woman will not be allowed to survive without the man that put her on this particular path to ruin.
Not long after the final bars of “I Dreamed a Dream” have faded, Fantine succumbs to tuberculosis and while visiting her on her deathbed, Valjean vows to care for her daughter. Though Fantine’s death pushes Valjean along his road to redemption, her character has no kind of control or power, in or over her own life. While Fantine’s fate is one that was not uncommon for a disenfranchised woman in nineteenth century France, the fact remains that, dramaturgically speaking, she is little more than a “hopeless romantic” designed to “set off the complex decisions, spiritual struggles, and brave actions of the men” (Wolf 143). Fantine, like the other female characters in *Les Misérables*, is a vehicle used to propel action, and to point to the male characters’ bravery or villainy.

While the story of *Les Misérables* is French in origin, the gender stereotype that finds a woman’s power fully dependent upon a man’s is a message that has been showcased in this study of American popular culture throughout the latter decades of the 20th century. It is important to note here that the portrayal of the female characters in *Les Misérables* is not wholly representative of Hugo’s original intent. In her book, *The Musical World of Boublil & Schönberg: The Creators of Les Misérables, Miss Saigon, Martin Guerre, and the Pirate Queen*, Margaret Vermette interviewed one of the men responsible for adapting *Les Misérables*, codirector John Caird. The director/writer remarked that the creative team did not want to leave anything out without “careful consideration,” and that they wanted to remove anything that “took away the main meat of the story, which is Valjean’s progress” (130). When the men responsible for the adaptation of Hugo’s story believe that the focus should center almost exclusively on the journey of its central male figure, it is no wonder that Caird suggested to Vermette that original drafts of the musical’s book were “too loaded emotionally toward Fantine” (130). Though these original drafts are not available for review, it is worth noting that Hugo’s original work devotes
its entire first section to the character, some three hundred pages of text, under the heading “Fantine.” In the musical, by contrast, the audience is left with an underdeveloped female character whose only true purpose is to strengthen Valjean’s story.

Fantine’s pining heart is passed down to her daughter, Cosette, who is the object of a young revolutionary, Marius’ affection. Cosette returns Marius’ affections, smitten at first sight with the dashing young man who is involved in the republican revolution against the monarchy. Valjean disapproves, and by insisting on keeping his adopted daughter locked away from the world, he exerts patriarchal control over the young woman’s potential for growth and empowerment. In sum, Cosette functions as little more than a character who highlights Valjean’s honor and stimulates Marius’ affections.

Many in Marius’ life do not appreciate Cosette’s whirlwind entrance into it, and the distraction is noted by his compatriots in the number entitled “Red and Black (The ABC Café)”:

**Enjolras:** Marius, you’re not longer a child

I do not doubt you mean it well,

But now there is a higher call.

Who cares about your lonely soul?

We strive towards a larger goal.

Our little lives don’t count at all! (Boublil 50)

Wolf suggests that, even though a potential relationship with Cosette draws some of Marius’ attention away from the revolution, he “has a fully engaged life and friends and interests outside his relationship with Cosette” (Boublil 143). Like her mother, however, Cosette is more one-dimensional; all of her actions are focused solely around her romantic and familial relationships with Marius and Valjean, respectively.
Finally, there is young Eponine, who is also in pursuit of Marius’s affection. As with the other principal female characters in the play, Eponine’s power is compromised in that her only desire, her only goal, is to be close to Marius. Even when Marius and Cosette sing of their love, Eponine stands in the shadows close by, lamenting Marius’ obliviousness:

**Eponine:** One more day with him not caring

**Marius & Cosette:** I was born to be with you

**Eponine:** What a life I might have known

**Marius & Cosette:** And I swear I will be true

**Eponine:** But he never saw me there. (61)

When Marius tells Eponine to spy on Cosette, she obliges, all in the name of making Marius happy. Eponine is so bewitched by Marius, a man who sees her as little more than an errand boy, she is willing to sacrifice both her femininity and her life for him by joining the revolution as a soldier in the piece’s second act. In order for Eponine to enter the space of war, she must shed her femininity and takes up the guise of male soldier; thus both Hugo and the musical’s authors seem to suggest that, as she is not the object of Marius’ affection, Eponine is of no use to him as a woman. Furthermore, her choice to join the revolution is framed as a result of her realization that her love for Marius will never be requited. The courage she shows in this scene is thus undermined by her motivation, as her actions imply that, without his love, her life has little meaning or value. She tells Marius of her desperation in “At the Barricade”: “I know this is no place for me / Still I would rather be with you!” (Boublil 66). Though Eponine is willing to die for Marius, she resigns herself to the fact that he will only ever be focused on Cosette. All she has left is to help him communicate with his lover:

**Marius:** Get out before the trouble starts
Get out, ‘Ponine, you might get shot!

**Eponine:** I’ve got you worried now, I have

That shows you like me quite a lot!

**Marius:** There is a way that you can help

You are the answer to a prayer!

Please take this letter to Cosette

And pray to God that she’s still there!

**Eponine:** Little you know!

Little you care! (66)

In entreating Eponine to leave the battlefield before she is hurt, Marius demonstrates that he is concerned with his friend’s safety and wellbeing, and his platonic affection for her is affirmed as the two sing “A Little Fall of Rain” during her subsequent death scene, when she returns from her mission and is fatally shot, just as Marius fears. He laments that he wishes to “close her wounds with words of love” and tenderly croons that she would “live a hundred years if [he] could show [her] how” (72) However, in sending his love-struck friend on an errand to take a message to his lover, Marius confirms Eponine’s suspicion that he will always be preoccupied with Cosette. Moreover, this scene reinforces Eponine’s chief narrative functions in *Les Misérables* – to emphasize Marius’ irresistible charms, and to facilitate the relationship between Marius and Cosette. Everything she is hinges on her relationship to the object of her unrequited love, and without Marius, there can be no Eponine.

With millions in box office and soundtrack sales, there is no denying that *Les Misérables* is one of the most lucrative and successful productions in theatre history. Despite the far-reaching influence of this beloved and revered musical and the fact that it features several
prominent female characters, however, Les Misérables is ultimately a story that uses female power in service of the patriarchy, fueling the narratives of its central male characters, Valjean, Javert, and Marius. Because popular entertainments are a window through which the social consciousness of an era may be examined, the question becomes: What was the cultural and political makeup of 1980s, and what do the popularity of Madonna’s music and Les Misérables’ say about the overarching values of this decade in American history, given the fact that both contain narrative threads that place limits or conditions on female power?

**Ronald Reagan and the Fight for a Moral Majority**

Ronald Reagan’s conservative patriarchal agenda and his emphasis on nationalism greatly influenced the mindsets and moral outlooks of many Americans during the 1980s. Before I begin my investigation of Reagan, it is important to specify what I am referring to when I discuss the performance of what I term “patriarchal nationalism.” As I employ the term “performance” in this context, I am not referring to the putting on of “a show, a play, [or] a dance” (Schechner 28). Instead, the performance of patriarchal nationalism is social; it is a performance that occurs in everyday life “to underline an action for those who are watching” (28). Thus, here I will be investigating how nationalism was performed within the social sphere, as opposed to in forums traditionally thought to house performance (i.e., theatres and stages).

When writing of “nationalism,” I refer to the work of Benedict Anderson, who begins his study of the concept by asserting that “nation” frequently eludes definition. To this end, he cites the work of Hugh Seton-Watson: “‘I am driven to the conclusion that no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists’” (Quoted in Anderson 3). Despite the apparent flexibility of the term, Anderson does eventually settle on a definition, suggesting that a nation constitutes “an imagined political community – and imagined as both
inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Anderson goes on to argue that nationalism is frequently invoked when a speaker or politician seeks to rouse support; therefore, it is performative. For example, politicians who, through their performances, place value on concepts such as unity and patriotism are, in turn, able to lead people to adopt a view of nation and community centered on those same concepts. Thus, the “performance of nationalism” refers to the performative production of political messages designed to foster a sense of nationalism.

Reagan’s performance of nationalism was social, designed to be watched and critiqued in social arenas, and his message was one of unity, patriotism, and community. This performance was also patriarchal, in the sense that Reagan valued nationalism as long as it served to further his conservative agenda. Reagan’s version of nationalism hinged on an adherence to particular religious and moral standards that bolstered pre-World War II era gender norms as well as restrictive ideas about sexual identities, preferences, and practices.

How does a president go about reverting back to 1940s sensibilities, four decades later? When Reagan first assumed the office in the early 1980s, the U.S. was coming to terms with a number of monumental events that, in many respects, defined the 1970s: the first presidential resignation in U.S. history when Nixon stepped down in the midst of the Watergate scandal; the perceived loss of the Vietnam War, which had only ended five years before; and the Iranian hostage crisis. In his study, *Culture in the Age of Money*, author Nicolaus Mills researches the connections between Reagan, the media, and money. Mills characterizes the United States in the early years of the 1980s as a country that was “still in shock from a decade of humiliation” (12). Mills goes on to suggest that it was under Reagan’s oversight that the nation began to recover from the malaise that haunted the country during Jimmy Carter’s term as president (12). The Reagan administration, however, was determined not to let the recent past dictate how the
American people perceived their country. As he claimed in his 1984 State of the Union Address, “The heart of America is strong; it’s good and true. The cynics were wrong; America never was a sick society.”

Though I argue that Reagan was performing patriarchal nationalism, I am not suggesting that the popular actor-turned-president was dishonest or disingenuous. By all accounts, Reagan believed fully in his message and in his vision for a better America. Nor is it my intention to suggest that the Reagan administration was the first to capitalize on the performance of patriotism or to attempt to influence public opinion; the role of president has always required an attention to both. Regardless, Reagan’s were ideals designed to create a particular imaginary America. Reagan’s nation was not imaginary solely because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them,” but also because, as Anderson points out, much of nationalism is about rallying a populace or community around brotherhood or patriotism, expressing loyalty to an entity with artificially-defined borders and often arbitrary defining characteristics (6). My goal here is to explore some of the particular performative steps that Reagan took with his performances to ensure that America was perceived as financially, politically, morally, militarily, and culturally sound.

Reagan made his way into the White House because America had voted for conservative leadership; thus, the majority expressed their willingness to be guided by Reagan’s moral compass. In his book, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, popular culture scholar Mike Madrid argues, Reagan came to the White House in the role of uncompromising patriarch:

As the 1980's dawned, a new administration moved into the White House, with a message that America needed to comb its hair, sit up straight, and put on a clean
Stern parents Ronald and Nancy Reagan were intent on cracking down on what they saw as years of drugs and negligent behavior that the nation had engaged in throughout the 70’s. (221)

From 1981 to 1983, Ronald Reagan’s “parenting” would include work to ensure that the world viewed America as both powerful and wealthy. In terms of military action, during Reagan’s first three years, the “most dramatic indication” of the administration’s early success and triumph could be seen in Reagan’s efforts to build an “America committed to showing its power” (Mills 14). Reagan wanted to see the nation reestablish itself as a military superpower, rather than continuing to feed what he called America’s “Vietnam Syndrome” (14). Of course, a psychological shift would not be enough in this regard; to be sure, Reagan knew that the military machine needed more fuel. To that end, he increased funding dramatically: “Between 1980 and 1987 the military budget more than doubled, climbing to $282 billion annually” (14). According to a 2004 Washington Post report, defense spending hit an all-time high in 1980 with a budget of $325.1 billion, and it only continued to grow once Reagan took office, hitting another high at $339.6 billion in 1981 (Schneider). According to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, most of the defense spending increase was used for “procurement and research and development programs,” and according to Norman R. Augustine, former chairman of Lockheed Martin, key military defense programs, that were important parts of America’s military backbone in the 1980s, had been developed during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter eras, and during the Reagan era they were procured (Schneider). While Reagan may not have been proud of the social aspects of the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, the obtaining of military programs that had been conceived in the 1970s brought about an announcement from the president on March 23rd, 1983. He began his speech from the Oval Office by stating:
I have reached a decision which offers a new hope for our children in the 21st century—a decision I will tell you about in a few minutes…. This subject involves the most basic duty that any President and any people share—the duty to protect and strengthen the peace. (Reagan)

What President Reagan would announce, just over two years into his first term, was the Strategic Defense Initiative, or, as it would commonly become known in the mainstream media, “Star Wars,” a moniker borrowed from popular science fiction franchise, the second installment of which had been released in the summer of 1980. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is an example, at least in concept, of Reagan’s desire to protect America – his “family,” to extend Madrid’s metaphor – in whatever way he saw fit. Reagan felt the SDI was a fitting alternative to “deterring nuclear attack exclusively by threatening nuclear retaliation” (Anderson “A Step Closer to Star Wars”), the method by which the United States had staved off the threat of nuclear attack from Russia since the 1960s. The SDI would create a closely-knit network, combining ground units and orbital defense satellites, creating a shield that could, potentially, destroy any nuclear threat targeting U.S. soil. While the “Star Wars” program never took off – in 1993, the Clinton administration mothballed it in order to focus more wholly on ballistic missile defense – Reagan’s defense initiative was one he would promote during his both of his presidential terms.

As these examples make clear, from the very beginning of his presidency, Reagan sought to convey the military power of the nation that he ran. But even before he established himself as a patriarch with ambitious military schemes, he was presenting himself a conservative, morally upright leader. In 1979, Jerry Falwell and his associates founded the Moral Majority in order to support and promote socially conservative messages. While the Moral Majority supported prayer in public schools and posited that, “the widespread teaching of Christian scriptures [was]
superior to the findings of modern science,” perhaps the most telling battles they fought were in the arenas of reproductive and civil rights (“Moral Majority”). For example, Falwell was outspoken against gay rights, notably supporting singer Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” crusade in 1977. Given his organization’s focus on a narrow definition of how to create and maintain a traditional family unit, it is of little wonder that since its inception the Moral Majority had sought out the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. As Falwell and his organization saw it, strengthening the moral fiber of America required strident opposition to both gay rights and women’s rights.

When referring to woman’s rights, particular attention must be given to Reagan’s stance on reproductive rights, which came to light early in the politician’s career. During the last leg of the presidential debates in Baltimore on September 1980, Soma Golden, editorial writer for the *New York Times*, asked then-governor Reagan about the Catholic church’s statement that voting for a presidential candidate who favored abortion was sinful. Reagan’s response was as follows:

> I think all of us should have a respect for innocent life. With regard to the freedom of the individual for choice with regard to abortion, there's one individual who's not being considered at all. That's the one who is being aborted. And I've noticed that everybody that is for abortion has already been born. (Presidential Candidates Debates)

Reagan’s anti-abortion stance came as no surprise, as his candidacy was supported by Falwell and the Moral Majority. Susan Faludi points to the ways in which Reagan’s political presence drastically affected the progress of the women’s movement: “Just when a ‘gender gap’ at the voting booth surfaced in 1980s, and women in politics began to talk of capitalizing on it, the Republican party elevated Ronald Reagan, and both political parties began to shunt women’s rights off their platforms” (11).
Reagan and the Moral Majority did nothing to hide the political relationship that they were cultivating in the months leading to November 1980 presidential election. If the partnership between the two entities was at all in question after Falwell attended the Republican National Convention in July of 1980, or after evangelical conservative congressman Guy Vander gave the keynote address at the convention, Reagan would firmly and explicitly establish the relationship between himself and the evangelical right the following month in Dallas, Texas.

During a meeting of the National Affairs Committee on August 22nd, 1980 – a roundtable discussion designed to insert evangelicals into mainstream politics – Reagan thanked his audience for “a fresh sense of purpose” and a “deeper feeling of commitment” when it came to the growth and prosperity of “religious America” (“National Affairs Campaign Address on Religious Liberty”). Statements like these make clear Reagan’s commitment to build an America upon the foundation of a moral code rooted in conservative Christianity. It was during this convention that Reagan gave the media a soundbite that solidified his collaborative relationship with the religious right and secured his place on the cover of the 25 September 1980, issue of Newsweek. Before Reagan went on to speak of religious teaching, of what he perceived as the infallible laws set forth by the Ten Commandments, and of traditional moral values, he said to the room full of evangelical preachers, “I know this is a non-partisan gathering, and so I know that you can’t endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you and what you’re doing” (Reagan). Reagan did not deny or downplay his connection to the Religious Right, and once he was elected, he showcased his support of the Moral Majority’s causes by appointing Robert Billings, a religious advisor on Reagan’s campaign and the Moral Majority’s first executive director, to a position within the Department of Education. As Stephen Johnson and Joseph Tamney assert in their article, “The Christian Right and the 1984
Presidential Election,” the Moral Majority reciprocated Reagan’s vote of confidence. That group eagerly championed him in his second campaign as well as the first, due in large part to his “support during his first term on such important Moral Majority causes, as anti-abortion and pro-school prayer constitutional amendments” (125).

As Reagan labored to bring his visions of increased military power and moral integrity to life during his first term, the women’s movement encountered several obstacles born out of the increasingly conservative atmosphere in Washington. In 1980, while women were working to bring greater awareness to issues such as domestic abuse and sexual assault, the government began taking money away from federally funded battered-women programs. The Reagan administration also defeated bills designed to bring in more funding, and it eliminated the Office of Domestic Violence after it had been operating for only two years (Faludi 11). In 1981, support for the Equal Rights Amendment, which had reached a “record high,” was defeated the following year. By the time Reagan was running for his second term in the mid-1980s, pro-choice advocates had “racked up their largest percentage ever supporting the right to abortion,” only to have the U.S. Supreme Court start talks to reconsider it (11).

As the 1984 election neared, the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and Reagan was alive and well. However, Johnson and Tamney suggest that, while the vote of the Christian Right did have a role in the 1984 election, the Moral Majority was facing increased resistance the second time around: “There were greater numbers of these anti-Moral Majority people who voted for Mondale than pro-Moral Majority people who voted for Reagan” (131). Despite the rise of anti-Moral Majority voters, Reagan moved into his second term, in no small part due to the Moral Majority raising $11 million for political lobbying in 1984 (Steinfels). The relationship between the president and many religious fundamentalists continued until 1988,
when the last political act of the Moral Majority was to put its endorsement behind Republican presidential candidate George H. W. Bush.

I contend that the symbiotic relationship between Falwell and Reagan kept the Moral Majority afloat until 1989, when it was legally dissolved months after Reagan had left office. In June of that year, when Falwell announced the shuttering of the organization at the annual Southern Baptist Convention, he pointed out that, while the organization had not solved the problems of abortion, pornography, or divorce, the Moral Majority had nonetheless achieved success in that, without its support, “Ronald Reagan would not have been elected President” (Steinfels). Concluding with a note of optimism, he proclaimed that he gave “President Bush an A-plus,” praising the new President as “a terrific sequel to Ronald Reagan,” who had laid the foundation that Bush would build his house upon (Bell).

This foundation that Reagan – and, by extension, the Christian Right – had laid was one that presented challenges for millions of Americans in the arenas of religious freedoms, reproductive health, and equal rights. Artists in the 1980s had to decide how they would confront these challenges in their work, and whether or not they would embrace the predominant political ideologies of Reagan and his supporters. As I argued earlier in this chapter, Madonna sought to subvert, and to simultaneously capitalize upon, the concretized gender norms that were revived and nourished in this conservative era, and the singer managed to expertly package and perform her persona in a way that ultimately made her one of the greatest popular music stars in American music history. While Madonna navigated her career through the landscape created by the marriage between Reagan and the Moral Majority, Les Misérables’ 1987 Broadway debut and its subsequent success, spoke of an American audience that was quick to embrace a narrative driven by the diminishing of female agency in the name of propping up patriarchal power.
Likewise, *Wonder Woman*, was another facet of popular culture that was affected by the conservative temperature of the 1980s.

**Wonder Woman: Fighting for Our Rights, but…in Those Satin Tights**

The power of the patriarchy, as evidenced by the political and religious atmosphere of the Reagan era, influenced the representation of Wonder Woman in drastic ways. On one hand, the heroine’s creative team took some significant steps to upturn many of the conservative ideologies that took hold in the 1980s. Unfortunately, however, there were also times when, like Madonna, Wonder Woman found herself fighting the patriarchy while, simultaneously, working with and for it. Despite the regrettable similarities between Madonna’s and Wonder Woman’s paradoxical positioning, a significant difference between the narratives of Wonder Woman and *Les Misérables* is the presence of powerful female characters that are not diminished props for patriarchal power.

Before continuing, I must highlight a point made by Bradford Wright in *Comic Book Nation*, which helps to further define the context of the 1980s. In sum, Wright argues that cost was one of the biggest obstacles for the comic book industry at the dawn of the 1980s, as prices were hitting an all-time high. The obstacle facing the comic’s industry makes sense when it is situated within the larger cultural context: While Reagan was preaching a message of financial optimism in the first years of his presidency, inflation was hitting industries and trickling down to the American people. The typical comic book buyer during the era, the young boy or girl with limited income, may not have directly felt the economic pinch of “fuel and paper shortages,” but these struggles also “accelerated an alarming rate of comic book price increases.” While both Marvel and DC were struggling to remain profitable by increasing their prices, in doing so they “threatened to price many of their young consumers out of the market” (Wright 258).
Thus, due to a changing economic structure and challenges to product distribution within the industry, which I will address in due course, the very future of the comic book business was in question in the early 1980s. The only thing that was keeping major publishers such as Marvel and DC afloat in the mid-to-late 1970s was the revenue accrued from properties such as DC’s animated *Superfriends* (a Saturday morning staple) and CBS’s live action *Wonder Woman*. In fact, by the end of the 1970s, licensing revenue was so soundly beating out publishing revenue that “some corporate executives apparently questioned the need to publish comic books at all” (259). The solution to the issue of shrinking revenue from publishing was found not in the way that the books were published, but in the way that they were distributed.

In the past, comic books were distributed in the same way as magazines. Issues of *Wonder Woman* were shipped alongside *Sports Illustrated* to supermarkets and newsstands. But as less and less space was given to comic books in grocery stores, a new kind of comic book proprietor emerged: comic book shops. Similar to those that dot the retail landscape today, these stores dealt only in books, magazines, and paraphernalia related to comic books. These comic shops were not run by grocery story general managers who viewed comic books as just another magazine; rather, comic shops were usually run by comic book enthusiasts. The most important aspect of the comic shop model, however, was the fact that the publishers could ship their products directly to these stores. The benefit for publishers was twofold: not only was there more display space for comics, but, unlike grocery stores, dedicated comic stores did not return unsold product.

Simultaneous to the success of the comic book shop model and the concurrent changing nature of distribution, the practice of comic creation underwent a renaissance as well. Writers, artists, and comic book publishers all began to take notice of the comic shop sales. These parties
quickly realized that avid fans, unlike grocery store and newsstand shoppers who casually perused magazines, were the main contributors to their profits. Independent publishers began to “target direct markets” by offering popular artists and writers both financial and creative incentives. At DC, for example, royalties were offered generously to creators who sold more than 100,000 copies an issue, and some companies also began to offer greater “creative autonomy” (Wright 262).

Changes to the ways that comic books were created, marketed, and sold precipitated a change in the way comic book writers and artists were perceived by their fans as well. By the mid-1980s, comic book creatives were being treated like celebrities within their communities, and the money they could generate for publishing companies afforded them an unprecedented level of freedom. This creative autonomy found writers and artists, particularly at DC and Marvel, drastically altering the way they portrayed their characters. Framed within the “Ages of Comic Books,” a classification system often cited by scholars of the genre, the 1980s ushered in a passing of the guard from the Bronze Age of Comic Books (1950-1970), to the Modern Age of Comic Books (1985-present). Two examples of the tonal shift from the Bronze Age to the Modern Age are DC’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1986-1987). Written by Frank Miller and Allen Moore respectively, these graphic novels – longer tomes of fiction that were illustrated in the style of comic books – portrayed traditional heroes as vigilantes, handing out harsh and brutal justice. In many respects, these narratives seemed to offer tacit support of Reagan’s agenda; their heroes seemed to reinforce the idea of a patriarchal leader who oversaw all, and the books could be read as advice on how good citizens should conduct themselves under such leadership. They also challenged the tenets of Reagan’s religious conservatism, however, as
their heroes were not without flaw, particularly in their use of extreme violence to enforce their own brands of justice.

DC moved into the Modern Age by calling for sweeping relaunches of all titles. In 1986 the company hired Frank Miller, a young artist who had recently achieved great acclaim for his work on Marvel’s Daredevil, to relaunch Batman. What followed was the aforementioned The Dark Knight Returns, drawn and written by Miller, which is lauded as “one of the most acclaimed superhero comics ever” (Sandifer 182). For Wonder Woman’s relaunch, DC looked to George Perez, who had been instrumental in the company’s landmark Crisis on Infinite Earths (1985). With Perez at the helm, Wonder Woman’s relaunch team grew to include editor Karen Burger and writers Greg Potter and Len Wein. In his essay, “Backlash and Bracelets: The Patriarch’s World, 1985-1992,” D. R. Hammontree argues that this team created a “reimagined Wonder Woman that retained many of the essential elements of the character,” keeping iconic images like the Lasso of Truth but jettisoning her obsessive romantic fixation on Steve Trevor (165). While the creative team overseeing this remade Wonder Woman was making changes, they were fully aware that they also had to come to terms with Reagan, his conservative supporters, and their outcry against equal rights and reproductive choice.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the 1980s saw a backlash against the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s. This backwards momentum was manifest in the patriarchal nationalism of Reagan and saw the “beginning of the postfeminist and anti-feminist effort” (Hammontree 164). However, though the anti-feminist movement found solid footing in Reagan’s America during the early 1980s, Susan Faludi argues it was born and nurtured in the 1970s, a time during which, “Women, the mass media seemed to have decided, were…equal and no longer seeking new rights” (89). While Faludi documents the advances made by women in the
1970s, she is also quick to point out that, during that same decade, the media performed support for the feminist cause only by portraying women as hungry, not for equality, but for style and fashion. Thus, Faludi considers female representation in the media of 1970s largely superficial; it was focused not on highlighting the importance of sisterhood or equality, but on a woman’s longing for “self-gratification” and material gain (89). To support her claim, Faludi analyzes images from advertisers and the media from the 1970s, which frequently highlighted “liberated single girls” and “perky MBA ‘Superwomen’ flashing credit cards at the slightest provocation” (90). According to Faludi, then, while the mass media of the 1970s did what it could to spread the gospel of a woman’s autonomy, it did so primarily in the interest of persuading her to spend her own hard-earned dollars, thereby failing to acknowledge the more inconvenient fact that the fight for equality was far from won.

A marked decrease in support for women’s causes came with the dawning of the 1980s, and many media sources moved to declare that feminism was dead. In 1986, ABC News dedicated part of their news cycle to a Peter Jennings report that asked, “What happened to American women?” Jennings’ response encapsulates the message about feminism that was prevalent in the mid-1980s: “The gains for women sometimes come at a formidable cost to them” (Quoted in Faludi 91). That same year, Newsweek asked the same question and answered it in a similar manner: “The emotional fallout of feminism” was having unexpected effects on women of the period, and the fight and focus on equality “had robbed them of their romantic and maternal rights and forced them to make sacrifices” (Quoted in Faludi 91). The backlash against feminism was an obstacle that the new, relatively unknown, Wonder Woman creative team had to contend with in order to tell stories about a strong, empowered female character. To accomplish the task, the relaunch of Wonder Woman included stories that found Diana dealing with real
world issues that were part of the 1980s culture, including depression, drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide. Despite the seriousness of these subjects, the creative team was still able to create stories that foregrounded Diana as a force of hope while bolstering feminist ideas. To support this claim, I will look to the emphasis the *Wonder Woman* relaunch creative team placed on the way the heroine interacted with her supporting cast, and the individual strengths of that supporting cast.

*Wonder Woman* Vol. 2 #1 (1987) eliminated Diana’s secret UN Ambassador/spy identity and saw the return of her Amazonian sisters, who had been notably absent since the early 1970s. These women warriors were, once again, led by Hippolyta; but with this reimagining, they were the embodied “souls of women who had been killed by men, their lives cut short by violence and hatred” (Hanley 229). In the Amazonian’s relaunched origin story, a group of goddesses in 1200 BCE decided that they were wearied by the constant evil of mankind and, in turn, chose to create a race of women. The creative team overseeing the relaunch made a point of stating that Ares, the god of war, did not want this new race to exist because he garnered all of his power, “from mankind worshipping war” (Hanley 228). With the help of Hermes and Artemis, the goddesses traveled to Hades, where Artemis freed the souls of women “who had been killed by men, their lives cut short by violence and hatred” (229). Until *Wonder Woman* Vol. 2, little had been done to present Wonder Woman’s family as capable, strong, or subversive in light of real world political, religious, or social structures. In other words, while Wonder Woman had moments when she took a stand for some of the new freedoms that women were afforded in the 1970s, her Amazonian sisters were not written as women who cared – or even knew – about such things.

In Vol. 2, however, the Amazonians changed, and their new origin story found the women of Wonder Woman’s family charged with a dual mission; they were to be warriors and
ambassadors, protecting and leading humankind with the guiding hand of love and equality. It is clear, therefore, that the creative team overseeing the relaunch of *Wonder Woman* infused the heroine’s family, as well as the larger narrative of Amazonian history, with contemporary anti-essentialist feminist ideals, a theory born in the early 1980s that sought to deconstruct “several problematic methodological assumptions” which began with “large-scale generalizations…about some phenomenon such as women, men, gender, work or sexuality” (Jagger 194). Overall, essentialism seeks to suggest that all women are, for all intents and purposes alike; that it to say, all women are assumed to be able-bodied, white, and middle class. As Alison Jagger posits in the book, *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, when the model for the feminist woman is one solely enabling the white, heterosexual, and normative, it disadvantages any woman who does not adhere to this particular model (194).

An example of this anti-essentialism sentiment within the *Wonder Woman* narrative is the aforementioned shift in the Amazon’s mission. Wonder Woman’s pre-1980s creative teams marked Diana as non-normative in that she existed outside of the dominant social group on Paradise Island. The Amazonians of Diana’s home held to their non-intrusive roles as observers, while Diana chose to act on behalf of humankind. These were the only roles that the Amazonians could inhabit before *Wonder Woman* Vol. 2. Essentialism sought to make over-generalizations about a woman’s role in society. Such was the case with the Amazonians and the singular role they were given. Granted, there is no documented connection between Wonder Woman’s creative team and the feminist theorists such as Deborah Rhode, a feminist critic of essentialist generalizations that corral all women into a singular feminism or a singular definition of “woman”. That said, the shift in the portrayal of the Amazonians as more than just silent participants in the war for the betterment of humanity, can be seen as running parallel to a time
when anti-essentialist thought is demanding that women be allowed to exist free of particular pre-conceived models of womanhood.

Despite this new narrative direction focused on teaching equality and seeking out justice, however, the Amazonians were still saddled with the same type of hyper-sexualization that had plagued the fictional race since its inception. It is here that the character of Wonder Woman, like Madonna, both fights and yet furthers the traditional sexualization of the female body, and, like Sandy in *Grease*, both shuns and solicits the male gaze. Such similarities are exemplified in the image of Wonder Woman splayed on the cover of Vol. 2’s first issue. Shown with her arms crossed at the wrists above her head, and her legs spread wide, Wonder Woman’s strained adductor muscles in her upper thighs draw the viewer’s eye inwards towards her crotch. While there may be those who look at the image and suggest that this is a stance of power, it could also be argued that the image is evocative of sadomasochistic eroticism, as her wrists almost appear to be bound, and her legs are spread by the overtly phallic spear and shield that rest between them. Wonder Woman is flanked by chiton-clad goddesses who all gaze placidly at the central figure in her seemingly powerful and yet submissive pose. Thus, despite the creative team’s desire to write a comic book that spoke of the paradisiacal Island of Themyscira, and the “self-sufficient warrior and artisan culture” that was “advancing scientifically, artistically and mystically as a communal matriarchy” (Hammontree 166), Wonder Woman and her people were still being used to stimulate the reader visually. Akin to what Mulvey says of female characters on the silver screen who are subject to the male gaze, the Amazonians are, in this visual, objects of sexual stimulation designed to be consumed by the viewer (9).

Even so, while highly sexualized visual elements like these were still common in the Wonder Woman mythos, her newly revised history would highlight the ways that these
Amazonian warriors were no longer hiding from the world of men, but protecting the world while men were too weak to understand what needed to be done. To this point, Hammontree argues:

It is trusting men that led to the initial fall of the Amazons, and, thanks to the Goddesses, they remain for centuries, sentries protecting an unknowing world from various evils until that time where man would have matured beyond his aggressive lust for power and domination over others. (166)

Like the heroes of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, Wonder Woman and the Amazonians exercise their own brand of authority for the betterment of humankind, steering the ship of humanity because it has proved itself incapable. In this, not only were readers presented with Wonder Woman as vigilante, but they were also “confronted with a cultural critique of the patriarchal world as…flawed and conflicted” (166); here, the creative team’s efforts to counter the anti-feminist backlash in culture are most palpable.

Of course, Wonder Woman could not spend all of her time on the island with her newly empowered sisters; as such, the relaunch creative team developed a supporting cast, one that was also very different from the one that had surrounded her in the past, another step in the resistance against the conservative attitudes that were prevalent within Western society. Two key members of this supporting cast – the god Hermes, and Professor Julie Kapatelis – were not only written as well-rounded and emotionally multifaceted, but also designed to counter the current culture.

Through the run of Vol. 2, the larger pantheon of Greek gods did not spend much time on Earth; they instead decided to leave their divine messenger and intermediary, Hermes, behind to oversee the protection of humankind. Though it would have been easy to craft this character as one whose sole purpose is to watch over and control Diana, the relaunch writers opted instead to
grant him a journey of his own. Throughout the series, readers see this abandoned god struggling to exist in a new reality without a family or a community to support him. In the course of his journey, he loses a child and eventually his mind as well. Hammontree argues convincingly that Hermes’ insanity may be regarded as a commentary “on the generational cultural shift of 1980s as the individual becomes fragmented from a larger” social identity (168). Hermes is like many of the men in Diana’s past, in that he is charged with controlling Diana. As such, he is powerful and has a great deal of agency. But it is also remarkable and noteworthy that, in an era in which conservative gender stereotypes were widely reinforced in American culture and politics, Diana’s power was not shackled to Hermes. Hermes’ lack of oversight, regarding Diana and her actions, showcases an important point: Diana’s power is not dependent on the presence, or advancement, of a male character. Unlike the women of Les Misérables, or the Wonder Woman of the previous decades, the second volume of Wonder Woman’s adventures does not find her, at least in the beginning, aligned to a man or a man’s mission. Steve Trevor’s death has not left her emotionally crippled as it had in Wonder Woman #179 (1968). While in the 1970s, Wonder Woman was given more agency, she still had to rely on I-Ching to train her, guide her, and help her hone her abilities. This, along with the self-imposed “Twelve Trials” which found the men of the Justice League spying on Diana to prove that she was a worthy addition to the super hero group, paints the picture of a woman, as powerful as Superman, whose power and agency had, often, been contained by the patriarchy. The creative team responsible for Wonder Woman Vol. 2 gave readers powerful male characters, such as Hermes, but in doing so did not regulate Wonder Woman to the role of supporting character. Hermes had a quest of his own to undertake, and it did not interfere with Diana, her own mission, or her power.
Perez and his team also introduced Julie Kapatelis, a professor of Anthropology from Harvard University, who functions as Diana’s guide in the real world. Rendered as a thriving academic and a single mother, Julie is another example of how the relaunch’s creative team sought to counter the anti-feminist backlash. In the course of the narrative of Vol. 2, it is revealed that Kapatelis had been to Wonder Woman’s home of Themyscira as a child after a boating accident washed her up on the mystical island’s shores. While she was there, one of the island’s inhabitants, Phythia, instilled in her Gaea’s morals of peace and love (Jimenez 226). Upon leaving the island, Julie’s mind was erased. As such, when she and Diana meet as adults in the future, they do not recognize each other; yet they feel a strong connection. Julie soon comes to occupy a central place in the group that surrounds Wonder Woman, including acting as a spiritual mother to Diana. Julie is an anomaly in the world of comics in the 1980s, as her portrayal “goes against the cultural attitudes of the backlash culture in that she is a successful academic and single mother (widow) in a time of ‘welfare queens’ and the stagnation of the Women’s equality movement” (Hammontree 168).

Conservative politicians, religious leaders, and other public figures in the 1980s did not singlehandedly forge the “bedrock of misogyny” that the women’s movement of the decade was trying to break down, but they did present many more vocal, and visible, obstacles for feminists trying to gain traction in the fight for equality (Faludi 10). In 1986, for example, the year before Wonder Woman’s Vol. 2 relaunch, Reagan gave a radio address to the nation concerning welfare reform. During the address, he spoke to what he referred to as the ever-present crisis of “family breakdowns, especially among the welfare poor” and the troubling lack of “families, as we've always thought of them” (“Radio Address to the Nation”). Against this political backdrop, Wonder Woman’s non-traditional takes on Hermes and Professor Kapatelis endeavored to upend
the traditional renderings of manhood and womanhood that Reagan was working so hard to ingrain in the culture of the 1980s.

In addition to reimagining the Amazonians and Diana’s supporting cast of characters, the relaunch also asserted a new point of view about the heroine’s relationship to the military. In the more than three hundred issues leading up the mid-1980s relaunch of the Wonder Woman title, Diana had always been an avid supporter of America’s military. She fought alongside American troops in various conflicts, was deeply involved working with and for the United States government in a variety of capacities, and frequently assisted with missions assigned to her love, Steve Trevor. In the 1980s, this relationship changed. Regarding this change, in her article, “Reading Wonder Woman’s Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation,” Mitra Emad points to moves Perez made to distance Wonder Woman from the American military.

Wonder Woman’s mission is again one of rescue, she is no longer an ally to an explicit war effort, and Perez reconstructs her as an ambassador from a superior culture…rather than an action figure of super-heroic proportions. Rather than battling villains, her first priority and role is diplomatic, changing society through utopian example. (973)

Perez and the creative team cut Diana’s connection to the military at a time when American military spending had reached record-breaking numbers – $456.5 billion in 1987, compared to the $339.6 million that was spent the year that Reagan was elected (Schneider). Wonder Woman’s previous ties to the military were not simply omitted from the narrative in Vol. 2; the Amazonian actively presented the warring factions of men with a better way. As Diana progressed through what the book’s creative team was now referring to as the “Patriarch’s
World,” the narrative focus was not on her physical strength, but on her diplomacy as someone dedicated to the nurturing, protecting, and educating of men.

Diana was not the only one whose views of war changed with the new creative team’s reimagining. Since his inception, Steve Trevor’s loyalty to the American military had been unwavering. Beginning in the 1940s, when he first worked with Wonder Woman, Trevor was consistently shown as one who was eager to move all women aside, including Wonder Woman, so he could flaunt his imagined masculine superiority and military prowess. This rendering of Trevor as a symbol of patriarchal oppression is completely undercut in Vol. 2. Instead, he is cast as a man who is ashamed of his role in the Vietnam War and who is a disappointment to the United States military because of his anti-war sentiments. Re-writing Trevor was thus another way that Wonder Woman’s 1980s relaunch team was working to speak against the conservative, evangelical influence of a Reagan’s patriarchal presidency.

The choices that Perez and his team made for Trevor, Hermes, and Kapatelis spoke volumes about the impact that the Vietnam War had on many Americans’ views on their nation’s place on the global stage. What stands out, when taking note of many of the pro-Vietnam War message found in television shows of the 1980s such as *China Beach* (1988) and *Tour of Duty* (1987), is that Trevor’s story was one designed to convey a particular anti-war message. Trevor’s re-write is not just an upturning of his traditional chauvinistic representation, but it is also a message that runs counter to Reagan’s public, pro-military agenda.

The antiwar message within the pages of the new *Wonder Woman* was not restricted to the Vietnam War, as the creative team also used their artistic medium to comment on the Cold War. Beginning in *Wonder Woman* Vol. 2, #5 (1987), Ares, the god of war, begins hatching a plan to initiate World War III, using nuclear weaponry from both American and Soviet missile
bases. As it is rendered in Vol. 2, Ares’ desire for war is self-serving; he is a being whose power comes from the number of people worshipping him through war. Over the course of the narrative, Ares’ manipulations of both American and Soviet figureheads are treated as testosterone-fueled displays of patriarchal domination. The creative team guiding the reimagined *Wonder Woman* was not at all subtle in its critique of Ares and the parallels between the Ares storyline and Cold War concerns that beset the political and social arenas of the 1980s. While Reagan had spent the decade focusing on the strength of America, Perez and his team used the stories of Wonder Woman to change the role of the Amazonians, to give Wonder Woman a powerful, and empowering support system that included a male protagonist that did not try to control Diana, and a female character who was a mother, a widow, and an academic, none of which were categories that were stressed in a negative light. The characters and storylines within *Wonder Woman*’s 1980s retooling highlight the subject of my inquiry – the interplay between presence and power – but they are also revelatory of the authors’ stand against the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s. Despite the continued use of the title character’s hyper-sexualized image, Wonder Woman also exercised a level of power not heretofore seen in her history. In the 1980s, the relaunch team gave the world a vision of Wonder Woman who could express frank criticism of the political culture of her time, and they surrounded her with a supporting cast that, unlike that of *Les Misérables*, included well-rounded, empowered females and supportive, though unobtrusive, males.

**Closing the Chapter on the 1980s**

In this chapter, I have sought to investigate the narratives and performances of nationalism, military superiority, and wealth propagated during the Reagan presidency. In a more specific sense, I have sought to trace the influence that Reagan’s war for morality bore on the
woman’s movement and the popular culture machine. Though they are, admittedly, but two examples from a ten-year period, the influence of this cultural trend is evident in the performance of Madonna as both powerful and submissive woman and in the limiting of female power in Les Misérables. Nonetheless, the performance of womanhood in both Madonna’s music and Les Misérables are revelatory of the social, cultural, and political values that Reagan espoused, and both demonstrate the constant push and pull that many artists of this decade felt as they were forced to choose whether they would work within the patriarchal system, against it, or both in turns.

As I argued in the final section of this chapter, George Perez was the driving force behind Wonder Woman’s mid-1980s relaunch; he and his creative time also found themselves subject to the push and pull of the patriarchal system. Perez’s vision of Wonder Woman undeniably capitalized on the sexualization of the female body. However, the team’s reworking of both Diana’s and the Amazonians’ backstories, and their implementation of well-written support characters, were contributing factors in a fight for equality that began to take shape in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s and beyond.

In the final chapter of my study, I will investigate whether the war against women, initiated in the 1980s, flourished or was quelled in the 1990s. Did Perez, et al.’s Wonder Woman remain a feminist book targeting young female readers? What role did aggression play in female representation? These questions, along with an investigation into the Third Wave of feminism, are central to my investigation of Wonder Woman in the 1990s.
CHAPTER IV: THE TIME FOR AGGRESSION IS NOW (1990S)

As I argued in chapter three, Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority worked to steer America in the direction of conservative, evangelical Christian values. While the 1980s was a time of traditional, and often troubling, performances of womanhood, the 1990s ushered in new considerations surrounding feminism, feminine aggression, and something I refer to here as a “masculine femininity.” There are two distinctions I must make when employing this compound term. First, I must acknowledge that while the singular concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” are themselves socially-constructed tropes, I am using this compound term to describe the moment when a stereotypically “feminine” character takes on traits that have been and are traditionally ascribed to men.

Secondly, with this term, I am referring to an emphasis, particularly in action/adventure narratives, on the erasure of a heroine’s femininity in exchange for power. I am not suggesting that the heroines of these narratives are not afforded, at least on a superficial level, a similar level of agency as their male counterparts. What I seek to highlight, however, is the important distinction between aggression and violence. In her book, *Push Comes to Shove: New Images of Aggressive Women*, Maud Lavin suggests that aggression is ever-present and necessary, roiling through our species as a key component of “anger, of determination, of movement forward, of space clearing, of lust, of harm, of survival, of creation…. confusion and motivation” (3). Though heroines in fictional stories should ideally be crafted as three-dimensional characters who have their own tendencies to release this type of aggressive energy, such aggression has, traditionally, been afforded solely to male characters.

Whether Steve Trevor, Danny Zuko, or Jean Valjean, the patriarchs I have highlighted in the course of this study are all given narrative license to express their aggression. Danger arises
when this aggression gives way to violence, which Lavin states is “destructive without bounds...beyond the pale, and beyond my own sense of what is ethically condonable” (108). There are some examples in which violent acts perpetrated by women on screen, can be read as subversive, and empowering, such as Jodie Foster’s Clarice Darling in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Comparatively, however, there are many more examples in 1990s popular culture when violent acts enacted by female characters are executed in the service of fetishizing that character, as was the case with Kylie Minogue’s Cammy in *Street Fighter* (1994), or the violence is performed in such a manner as to create familiar images that the viewer recognizes as examples of male-centric violence. That is to say, there are moments in which the violence done by women appeals to the audience member that is less concerned with three-dimensional characters and far more interested in women acting like the man from their favorite action-adventure entertainments. In this chapter, I will focus on a few key examples of women, both real and fictional, who stood in the spotlight of popular culture throughout the 1990s. An examination of the impact that Lara Croft, Buffy Summers, Anita Hill, Monica Lewinsky, and Wonder Woman had on the cultural zeitgeist of the decade emphasizes two important points. First, it points to the frequency with which narratives of aggression – both from women and towards women – were manifest during this period. Secondly, I posit that a study of these women will prove that examples of female aggression, while on the rise in the 1990s, were not always praised, and were at times vilified.

The trope of masculine femininity often occurs when a female character is so paradoxically constructed that she can only inhabit the space of violent aggressor, taking on certain characteristics traditionally reserved for men in popular narratives. While in the 1980s, the most influential action stars were Sylvester Stallone (the *First Blood* trilogy), Arnold
Schwarzenegger (*Terminator*), and Bruce Willis (*Die Hard*), Sigourney Weaver’s turn as the forceful and fearless Lt. Ellen Ripley in 1986’s *Aliens* laid the groundwork for the “masculine” heroine to become an increasingly popular role. The phallocentric action movie genre continued its slow evolution with the 1991 release of *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, which finds Linda Hamilton’s Sara Connor battling alongside Schwarzenegger titular character in a battle to save the human race. What I would argue, however, is that while Hamilton’s role in this film was a welcome change from narratives showcasing white, hard-bodied men dealing in remarkable violence, stories such as Conner’s overlook the importance of nuanced portrayals of aggression and opt instead for the same clichéd portrayals of violence that made the action movie genre so popular in the 1980s.

To further my analysis of the erasure of womanhood in exchange for violence in 1990s popular culture, I will offer two additional case studies: of developer Core Design’s 1996 video game *Tomb Raider*, and of the 1997 television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. An exploration of both franchises highlights the fact the aggression displayed by both *Tomb Raider*’s Lara Croft and Buffy, like many of the female characters in 1990s fiction, was acceptable if the performance of aggression was not scripted as a direct affront to the patriarchy. In this chapter, then, I argue that heroines like Lara and Buffy come with a particular palatability because they are not a threat to the masculine status quo. Allied to this is the paradoxical construction of both popular heroines; just as Madonna’s pop star persona did in the 1980s, these franchises offered a subversion of traditional gender roles while at the same time reinforcing tenets of patriarchal power and male fantasy. Beyond my exploration of the construction of characters Lara Croft and Buffy Summers, I will analyze the cultural contexts into which these two popular culture behemoths were born, as popular entertainment.
Concurrent with the creation and dissemination of masculinized femininity, the 1990s also saw two unique and newsworthy events that spoke to the rights of women in the fight against patriarchal powers. In the third section of this chapter, I will begin with an investigation into the effect of Anita Hill’s public testimony against United States Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991, and the ways in which her legal action against him highlighted the aggression done by a powerful female figure. Next, I will turn to the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal of 1998, exploring the aggression that was both enacted upon, and by, Lewinsky. I will conclude my chapter by returning to Wonder Woman, arguing that, in the last decade of the 20th century, the heroine was stripped of the positive feminist messages she had become associated with in the 1980s, and saddled instead with darkness and violent aggression designed to highlight a familiar masculinity, all the while portraying her as dangerous sexual object.

**Tomb Raider, Buffy, and the Changing of the Game**

During the 1990s, the fashion supermodel ascended to heights of celebrity never before attained. In contrast to models like Lauren Hutton and Beverly Johnson, who garnered widespread attention in the 1970s but never overshadowed the female faces featured on the silver screen, supermodels of the 1990s shone brighter than many stars of popular films. It was not long before supermodels, and the new standards of beauty they represented, had infiltrated all avenues of popular culture. For example, supermodels Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, and Christy Turlington appeared in George Michael’s music video “Freedom! ‘90” (1990), and Iman appeared in Michael Jackson’s “Remember the Time” (1991). Likewise, between 1994 and 1999, supermodel Claudia Schiffer released seven films and opened a restaurant with fellow supermodels Elle Macpherson and Naomi Campbell called the “Fashion Café,” a restaurant that
was once described by the Associated Press as, “a couture version of Planet Hollywood and the Hard Rock Café” (“Trendy Celebrity”). The influence of “Linda, Christy, Naomi, Cindy, and Claudia…The Babe Squad” made its way into Hollywood as well (Madrid 273). Gradually, the focus on action heroes like Sylvester Stallone’s John Rambo shifted to supermodel heroines, such as Peta Wilson as the title character in television’s *La Femme Nikita* (1997), and Milla Jovovich as Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* (1997). In his book, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey Brown suggests that the advent of the action heroine “babe” granted female characters and actors – supermodel or not – “access to a position of empowerment” (43). In *Bad Boys* (1995), for example, Julie Mott, played by Téa Leoni, is a spirited, independent character whose presence in the film veers from traditional damsel-in-distress narratives. Likewise, in *The Matrix* (1999), Trinity, played by Carrie Ann Moss, is an expert in martial arts and computer hacking skills, and is not overshadowed by her male counterparts. These characters, along with other female figures found in action-adventure films of the decade, were a reimagining of the traditional action hero, representing “a potentially transgressive figure capable of expanding the popular perception of women’s roles and abilities” (43).

Before continuing it is important to note that while the above examples do offer important illustrations of female empowerment during the 1990s, the acceptance of those narratives by popular culture is due, in large part, to the fact that they are fictional. Stories of physically capable, intelligent, women embodying heroism and violence in ways traditionally attributed to men are stories that, while compelling, do not threaten to overturn the patriarchy because they are fictional. These stories feature acts of aggression that are praised by female and male audiences alike. I am not discounting that visceral portrayals of female aggression give
female characters the kind of empowerment that has, traditionally, been reserved for men, but, as I will argue in the course of this chapter, female aggression without the buffer of fiction to protect the patriarchy, is often demonized.

I also argue that in the 1990s, some of the most popular portrayals of female aggression traded a nuanced femininity for physical objectification and a one-dimensional portrayal of heroines who could only express aggression through excessive violence. An excellent example of this paradoxical empowering-yet-limiting portrayal of fictional female aggression may be found in the character of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, a cross-media franchise that first emerged as a video game in 1996 and continues to inspire reinterpretation today, with a new film slated for release in 2018. In total thus far, Croft has shot, grappled, and punched her way through eleven video games, two movies, and multiple comic book runs. Originally imagined as a “male Indiana Jones”-type character, Croft is an archeologist who is generally thought of as “intelligent, affluent, [and] athletic” and very capable when it comes to taking care of herself (Wainwright). Her star rose quickly, and during the first year of the franchise’s life span, Croft was the subject of many “lucrative advertising campaigns” (Wainwright). She was featured on the cover of over fifty magazines, “many of which had little or nothing to do with game culture,” and appeared in music tours (her figure was prominently displayed as part of a digital backdrop during the band U2’s 1997 “PopMart” world tour), on posters, in animated television shows, and as a posable action figure (Brown 108). Unfortunately, another characteristic of the heroine that has come to be just as emblematic as her intelligence, independence, and physical prowess is the fact that she is also “rather well-endowed” (Wainwright). The impact that the character had on popular culture narratives of the 1990s as a cunning and able heroine is diminished by the fact that her body was so wildly fetishized. Additionally, the kind of violence that Croft exacted did
not, in any way, set her apart from her male counterparts; in many narratives, she performed like a one-dimensional male action star whose only notable difference was an exaggerated set of curves.

Croft’s various performances have both subverted gender norms and, at the same time, worked to reinforce them for the sake of profit. The rise of the Tomb Raider franchise came on the heels of many successful video game franchises. Violent portrayals of masculinity in video games emerged in games such as Duke Nukem (1991), which featured a foul-mouthed, violence-distributing, white, male protagonist. And while games such as the popular Mortal Kombat (1992) featured playable female characters, their roles in the narratives were typically inconsequential. With the creation of Tomb Raider, for the first time in video game history, the sole protagonist and the singular focus of the narrative was a woman. As players moved through Croft’s story, they were tasked with solving puzzles, performing remarkable acrobatic feats, and gunning down both human and animal adversaries. The violence is no more or less shocking than the images found in other video games of the era, but never had such acts been exacted by a woman. While the story of Tomb Raider features Croft kicking, jumping, and shooting her way towards her goal, however, the story does nothing to promote any sort of feminist message. The power that Croft has, in her story, comes from her ability to navigate a man’s world and kill just like a stereotypical male character does. The only thing traditionally feminine about the character is her sexualized body; thus, playing, or performing, Lara Croft does not require the target audience of heterosexual, cisgender male players to sacrifice any masculinity in favor of femininity.

I am not suggesting that Croft’s presence within popular culture has not been enjoyable for gamers regardless of gender, or that authors such as Esther MacCallum-Stewart are incorrect
in asserting that Croft is a worthy icon for many gamers. I am arguing, however, that Croft was able to infiltrate a traditionally male arena due in large part to the erasure of any stereotypically feminine, non-physical qualities. For many gamers, Croft’s actions satisfy the player’s desire to embrace a violent masculinity while, at the same time, offering up the protagonist as the subject of objectification.

In her essay “‘Take That, Bitches!’: Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives,” Esther MacCallum-Stewart argues that critics who spend inordinate amounts of time analyzing Croft’s physical form do the character a disservice by not focusing on “any productive representations or her [Croft’s] appropriation by female gamers” (MacCallum-Stewart). MacCallum-Stewart makes a fair point, and many critics have found Croft a welcome change to the male-dominated world of action-adventure video game. In their article, “The Laura Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games” Jeroen Jansz and Rynel Martis posit that global appeal of Lara Croft and the Tomb Raider franchise stems from “the appearance of a competent female character in a dominant position [of power]” (Jansz et al, 8). Feminist science fiction writer, Carol Pinchesfsky acknowledges that Croft is a “symbol of female self-empowerment” (“A Feminist Reviews…”).

It is difficult, however, to ignore the troubling way that Croft’s body has been represented throughout the franchise. As the storylines and gameplay in the Tomb Raider titles are not lauded as innovative, “the incredible popularity of Lara Croft if due as much (if not more so) to her idealized image as it is to the quality in the game” (Brown 108). Indeed, the game’s publishing company, Eisdos, once inexplicably saw fit to release Croft’s measurements – 38”-24”-34” – to the public, a clear indication that the character was designed both for the player’s gaze and for marketability (“Lara Croft”). Croft’s creator, Toby Gard, and the many developers
behind the still-popular *Tomb Raider* franchise admittedly challenged traditional action/adventure game tropes by centering the game around the performance of a powerful, independent female protagonist. By crafting Croft as a hyper-sexualized avatar, however, they also used her to appeal to the male consumer’s fetishization of women as dangerous sexual objects, while assuring them that they could play the game as Croft with even the most fragile senses of masculinity intact.

Another example of a fantastical female aggressor from 1990s popular culture is Buffy Summers, the titular character from the popular *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Unlike troubling narratives featuring Croft, Buffy’s stories contained many powerfully feminist messages; at the same time, however, I argue that even Buffy’s power occasionally depended upon the erasure of her femininity.

In 1997, the WB television network – owned, like DC Comics, by Warner Brothers – aired the pilot episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a series based on the 1992 movie of the same name. Though Buffy wields a great deal of power, she is, at times, constructed in a contradictory manner. Volumes have been written on the expansive fictional universe of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its inhabitants, a universe which spawned not only a television series, but also a movie, comic books, and a spin-off series, *Angel*. For the purposes of my study, I will focus on an analysis of the ways in which Buffy’s narrative upended traditional entertainment tropes like the ones I have explored previously, while at the same time highlighting the show’s implications that the act of embracing nonviolent aggression necessarily weakens a heroine.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tells the story of Buffy Summers, a young woman who transfers to Sunnydale High School after being kicked out of her former school for accidentally burning down the gymnasium while fending off a wave of deadly vampires. Over the course of
the first episode, a few key aspects of the show’s premise are revealed. First, in the basement of Sunnydale High School, there is a “Hellmouth,” a location where the barriers between Earth and Hell are porous. Thus, Sunnydale High School, and by extension high school itself, can be read as a metaphor for hell. Second, this Hellmouth draws beasts and beings from the realm of the supernatural into the town of Sunnydale. It follows that Sunnydale, which is portrayed as an idyllic, middle-class town – an ironic nod to the classic B-movie horror films of the 1950s – needs a protector. Luckily for Sunnydale’s citizens, there is prophecy that states, “Into every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). In the 144 episodes that follow, the creators of Buffy the Vampire Slayer mix tales of killer robots, invisible girls, and giant snakes that have appetites for high school principals, with witty, often thought-provoking, takes on heroism, feminism, and the power of the female body.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* stands apart from many of the case studies I examine in previous chapters in the way that she is both a powerful female aggressor and a leader. As the “Slayer,” Buffy is the “Chosen One” and as such is born with incredible strength, speed, and agility to battle the forces of darkness who generally come complete with the same skills and abilities. While this does mean that Buffy’s aggression often takes the form of physical violence, this is what Lavin refers to as “retaliatory violence” (Lavin 111), a violence that is necessary for survival or reprisal. Buffy does not engage in physical altercations in the name of sport; rather, she does so because she is a protector. During her confrontations, though there are many heroes and villains inexplicably well-versed in karate, Buffy does not let loose battle cries or revel in the downfall of her enemies; rather, she punctuates her encounters with quips. In episode 62, “Wild
at Heart” (1999), for example, Buffy is set upon by a vampire while she is out on patrol. She
raunts him:

Buffy: You were thinking, what, a little helpless coed before bed? You know
very well, you eat this late….

Buffy proceeds to stab her vampiric attacker in the heart with a stake (one of the only ways to
vanquish a vampire within this fictional world). As she does so, she continues,

Buffy: You're gonna get heartburn. Get it? Heartburn?”

The vampire stares blankly, not offering up a reaction, as he explodes in a blast of dust. Buffy
feigns dejection:

Buffy: That's it? That's all I get? One lame-ass vamp with no appreciation for my
painstakingly thought-out puns.

In this episode, and in many others, Buffy demonstrates that, while her aggression requires
violence, she is not defined by the violent act, and her physical strength is neither her defining
characteristic nor the only source of her power.

The premise of Buffy calls for a solitary hero, in this case a single young woman, who
must fight alone against the forces of darkness. And yet, within the first episode, Buffy is
surrounded by a supporting and supportive cast, which includes Rupert Giles, Buffy’s mentor
and trainer; Willow Rosenberg, Buffy’s best friend and a timid and bookish Wiccan; and Xander
Harris, the reliable, unrealistically-attractive outcast. Together, they become a part of Buffy’s
power base, the foundation upon which she is energized and bolstered to do the work she was
born to do, namely, vanquishing evil. She does not have to demand the group’s support, the
source of her strength; they give it freely. Buffy’s relationships with the male characters on the
show are particularly telling. From Giles, Buffy’s Watcher, tasked with guiding the Vampire
Slayer through the trials and tribulations, both literal and metaphorical, of being a teenage monster hunter, to Angel, Buffy’s square-jawed, brooding 270-year-old vampire love interest, the male protagonists of the show seek out Buffy’s wisdom, and, more often than not, are saved by her. Buffy’s supporting cast constitutes a community with a unified vision: a dedication to Buffy and to her righteous cause.

As Buffy is the protector of Sunnydale, her enemies, who are predominantly male, can easily be read as the patriarchy, constantly trying to impede Buffy when she chooses to challenge their power. While Buffy’s enhanced strength and accelerated healing are generally enough to see her through the obstacles she faces, there are occasions when her support system is vital to her victories. While the television trope of a lone hero pulling together companions to create a familial support system was not a new concept in the 1990s, from time to time, Buffy incorporated story arcs that required the heroine to rely on her “family” in the name of survival.

An example of this familial power can be found in the season 4, episode 21, entitled “Primeval.” In the episode, which serves as the climax for season 4, Buffy must, as she does every season, topple the antagonist who has been the source of the rising tension throughout the year’s arc, typically a male monster or demon who seeks to dominate her with his supernatural powers. In season 4, the seemingly undefeatable foe, a cyborg named Adam, is creature that is an amalgamation of military technology and demon physiology. Adam is a creation of the Initiative, a secret government organization that hopes to weaponize supernatural creatures. Throughout the season, as Buffy and her friends are adjusting to their freshmen year in college, members of the Initiative try to convince Buffy that the enslavement and torture of monsters, in the name of research and development, is the only way to police the supernatural threat. It should be noted here that morality within the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer does not dictate that monsters are
inherently bad. Instead the monsters on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have the choice to fight or embrace their natures. For Buffy and her friends, the world needs to be protected from evil, not difference. The Initiative has other ideas, though, and throughout season 4, they seek to cleanse the world of the supernatural, convinced that there can be no good in something that is monstrous.

By the end of the season, the Initiative’s weapon, Adam, is fully functional, and despite Buffy’s best efforts, she is physically bested by the cyborg. During the episode “Primeval,” Adam turns against his human creators and releases the monsters that the Initiative had captured and tortured, knowing that the military soldiers and the monsters will eradicate one other. Adam plans to take all the dead bodies in the aftermath, monster and man alike, with the goal of creating an army of cyborgs like himself. While Buffy’s team eventually discovers a means by which to stop Adam’s dastardly plan, it requires that Giles read a Sumerian spell as Willow performs it, all while Buffy is within striking distance of Adam. As it is unlikely that these things can be done in concert, Xander, the non-superpowered “big brother” of the family unit, jokes:

**Xander:** So—no problem. All we need is a combo Buffy with slayer strength, Giles' multi-lingual know-how, and Willow's witchy power.

In the episode’s fourth act, while Buffy is fighting Adam, her friends station themselves nearby; risking their lives to help their friend, they use magic to unite the power of Willow’s spirit, Xander’s heart, and Giles’ mind. Buffy, imbued with the power of her makeshift family, can once again thwart a symbolically patriarchal force to save the world. Other fantasy and science fiction television shows of the 1990s, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *The Powerpuff Girls*, had strong heroines whose adventures partnered them with characters who functioned as valuable support systems, but in this episode, Buffy’s power is literally augmented by her found
family, some of whom have no supernatural ability. Not only do they follow her, willingly, but they are willing to sacrifice themselves for her if need be.

While the theme of love and friendship, coalescing into an unstoppable force to empower a strong heroine, is apparent throughout the series, the show is not without its problematic moments. At times, *Buffy* falls back on familiar gendered messages and troubling representations of the female and the feminine. To begin, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* demonstrates that aggressive females could, at times, be well-represented in the popular culture of the 1990s, imbued with power and agency tied neither to their physical beauty nor to their romantic relationships with men. While Buffy and her friends are painted in a mostly favorable light, however, Buffy’s conflicting feelings that revolve around the character of Cordelia Chase – and what she represents – strike a note of discord in this otherwise empowering composition. Cordelia is the beautiful, rich, cheerleader who is often surrounded by other young women of the same ilk. Cordelia dreams of a time when a glamorous future takes her from “boring” Sunnydale to stardom in Los Angeles. Cordelia is popular culture’s clichéd “mean girl,” a fact made clear in the show’s pilot episode “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” when she verbally demeans Willow, saying “Willow! Nice dress! Good to know you've seen the softer side of Sears” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”).

Despite her abrasive personality, Cordelia represents a stereotypical ideal of youthful femininity that Buffy desperately wishes she could attain. She has the freedom to focus on material possessions, dating, and the gaggle of shallow female stooges who laugh at all her jokes. While there is no essential truth in this definition of “femininity,” this is how Buffy and her high school compatriots interpret the term within the world of the show. In season 3, episode 5 (“Homecoming,” 1998), for example, Buffy compiles a list of Cordelia’s positive qualities; they
include, but are not limited to: “popular with boys,” “makes friends easily,” and “expensive clothes.” The ease with which Cordelia flaunts her popularity and possessions in the halls of Sunnydale High sets her up as a natural rival for Buffy, rather than as a potential ally, because the show makes it clear from the start that superhuman strength and stereotypical “femininity” cannot exist simultaneously for Buffy. Buffy longs for the vibrant social life and the sense of normalcy that Cordelia represents, an issue that is foundational in Buffy’s struggles to come to terms with her life as the Slayer.

The fifth episode of season 1 (“Never Kill a Boy on the First Date,” 1997) revolves around this conflict. Buffy’s role as Slayer is interfering, once again, with her attempts to lead a normal teenage life. By this point in the season, Giles, as her Watcher, has spent considerable time trying to make Buffy recognize that the normalcy she longs for is woefully out of her reach:

Giles: Buffy, maintaining a normal social life as a Slayer…i-i-is problematic at best.

Buffy: This is the 90s. The 1990s, in point of fact, and I can do both. Clark Kent has a job. I just wanna go on a date. (“Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”)

While the show could use moments like these to affirm Buffy’s ability to “have it all,” the writers of the show instead use the perils and pitfalls of the series to reiterate Giles’ sentiments. Buffy has been forced into a life as the Slayer, coupled with the aggression and violence that accompany that role, and her interests and desires are kept in check by the white male father-figure in her life, Rupert Giles, her Watcher. The relationship between Buffy and Giles is used, throughout the series, to cement the point that she cannot be the Slayer and also embrace her own conceptualization of a life that is normal. In her essay, “Cordelia Chase as Failed Feminist Gesture,” Amijo Cameford suggests that the differences between Cordelia’s perceived femininity
and Buffy’s apparent lack thereof create a palpable power struggle. The “traditional dogmatic” approach states that “gender equality necessitates woman’s forced abandonment of ‘womanhood’ and an active movement towards becoming ‘brothers’” with her male counterparts (150). In the case of Buffy Summers, abandoning the traditional/stereotypical ideal of womanhood/femininity that she longs for is a necessary step towards becoming as powerful as the evil she is forced to battle. While Lara Croft’s “womanhood” was sacrificed on the altar of creating a familiar masculinity that male gamers would be comfortable embracing, Buffy is forced to make a choice between developing her aggressive, supernatural gifts and living the life of a stereotypical high school girl; it is clear from the start that she cannot have both.

While Buffy’s character was eventually allowed to evolve into a responsible adult who looked after the civilians of Sunnydale while also raising her sister Dawn, the earlier seasons of the show (1997-1999) contained elements that undercut the affirmative message about the powerful potential of well-placed female aggression that Buffy the Vampire Slayer sought to capture. Buffy’s power was connected to Giles, her Watcher, and while he eventually became more of a partner than a mentor in the war against evil, Buffy was heavily dependent on him for the first three seasons of the show. Giles was not the only man in Buffy’s life who controlled her power. Angel, Buffy’s centuries-old boyfriend, was the killer with a soul, a vampire whose story was one of redemption. Buffy’s relationship with Angel, however, brought about a great deal of heartache for those around her, as their first sexual experience turned him into a homicidal killer, who then terrorized and/or murdered Buffy’s friends and family. While the story of Buffy and Angel’s relationship remains one of the hallmarks of the show’s seven seasons, Buffy’s journey was always, on some level, complicated by the presence of a white, male romantic interest, who pulled her attention and, at times, clouded her judgement, as she grappled to hold onto another
vestige of normalcy. Though this is not an unusual trope in filmic representations of any romantic relationships, Buffy’s case is a bit more complicated, given the fact that the show did not allow her to maintain “normal” romantic relationships, either within or without the supernatural community, while continuing her work as the Slayer. Thus, in Buffy’s universe, the embracing of her “femininity,” and the romantic missteps that resulted, had potentially dire consequences not only for the parties immediately involved, but also for the entire fictional world Buffy was sworn to protect.

Perhaps the greatest offense against the message of positive female aggression which, again, by Lavin’s definition is a woman’s usage of “force to create change – fruitful, destructive or a mix of the two,” is the fact that Buffy’s power, not unlike Lara Croft’s, is contingent upon an erasure of her femininity. While both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Tomb Raider* offer female protagonists well-versed in their own types of world-changing aggression, the former’s power in the beginning of her story is directly connected to a Watcher, and the latter’s power plays second fiddle to the character’s sexual fetishization. With the erasure of their femininity, both women become heroes who traffic in the familiar gun-wielding, karate-kicking, explosion-creating action hero tenets made popular by their male action-adventure counterparts. As the aggression is recognizable, it is deemed acceptable by viewers and fans who might turn their back on an explicitly feminist protagonist. Familiar masculinity and overt sexuality give these women the means by which to exist in arenas traditionally reserved for male heroes, as both traits make them less threatening and more desirable. While later iterations of both Buffy and Lara Croft have seen an infusion of more contemporary feminist messages, in the 1990s, both characters’ abilities to affect positive change through aggressive acts were limited by traditional gendered social mores. Moreover, I contend that though the aggression wielded by these fictional heroines
was accepted by audiences in the 1990s, similar acts of aggression were often met with shaming, ridicule, and humiliation when performed within the context of actual social life. This paradox, the lauding of fictional female aggression and the vilifying of actual female aggression, is powerfully evident in the treatment of Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky.

**Female Aggression in the Political Arena: Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky**

Thus far in this chapter, I have focused on how fictional female aggression is framed and performed in popular culture narratives, narratives that too often limit their heroines’ strength and power by couching them in familiar masculinities that make these strong female characters less threatening, and thereby more palatable, to male audiences. In order to better grasp how these narratives became such popular reflections of the social landscape of the 1990s, it is helpful to examine some of the political and cultural movements that also shaped the decade.

In the 1990s, an increasing number of women in America exercised positive aggression, fighting for their own welfare, and for that of their families. According to the *International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family*, by 1994, “the median income for full-time year-round work in the United States was $22,900 for white women, $20,700 for African-American women, and $17,200 for Hispanic women” (“Single-Parent Families”). At the time, the majority of single mothers were working (79%), but one-third of those working mothers were only employed part-time. Single mothers in the 1990s were more likely than their male counterparts “to experience layoffs…receive fewer fringe benefits, and…pay higher expenses for childcare” (“Single-Parent Families”). The methods used to address the needs of the single mother during the 1970s and 1980s were built primarily upon the principle of bolstering the nuclear family, not encouraging female independence. According to the Population Reference Bureau, these two decades saw an increase in single-mother families, “leading to numerous national and state policy initiatives
aimed at strengthening marriage” (Mather 1). In fact, one of the primary goals of welfare reform legislation in the 1980s was to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” as a means of improving outcomes for kids (1). This legislation fell short of its goal, however, and the number of single-mother families in the U.S. hit a record high in the mid-1990s. As single mothers did not have the option of depending on their spouses to help carry the burden of supporting their families, they often had to fight solitary battles for benefits such as better pay, healthcare, and time off.

It was within this context that continued to put women at a disadvantage that aggressive women also made a significant mark in the political arena of this decade; unlike Buffy and Croft, however, that aggression was met with derision. Both Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky provide generative case studies of the challenges women often faced when thrust alone under the judgmental eye of the public; as Maud Lavin would likely note, neither of these women had the “daily presence of a man performing aggression on behalf of both genders,” and they were harshly scrutinized for their independently aggressive actions (238). In the United States, two disparate political climates defined the 1990s. First, there was the George H. W. Bush administration, which lasted from 1989-1993 and was, in many respects, informed by lingering social and political values of the Reagan era. This was followed by Bill Clinton’s presidency, which spanned the eight years from 1993-2001. Both administrations, in their own ways, contributed to some of the patriarchal discourse that was to define the 1990s.

By the time that George H. W. Bush was elected, he had built an impressive career, which included, but was not limited to, occupying the office of Vice President during Ronald Reagan’s two terms in the Oval Office. Unsurprisingly, then, Bush’s presidency was built upon the patriarchal foundations established by Ronald Regan and the Moral Majority. In 1989, Jerry
Falwell proclaimed that George Bush would be a “terrific sequel to Ronald Reagan,” and Bush seemingly proved himself to be worthy of the evangelical leader’s good faith when he led the nation in prayer during his inaugural address. In his prayer, the newly installed President spoke of power in a way that was only slightly different than the way his predecessor had:

    Make us strong to do Your work, willing to heed and hear Your will, and write on our hearts these words: “Use power to help people.” For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. (“George Bush: Inaugural Address”)

While Reagan’s stated priority was to ensure that America would be a nation respected at home and abroad, Bush focused on his vision of a nation that would understand its power as a divine gift and would therefore wield it wisely. While their language was different, both Presidents demonstrated a core belief that America should spread the gospel of its supposedly God-given power far and wide, and both clung to the conservative political and religious values that helped to ensure their election.

Bush’s desire to dictate moral aptitude was revelatory of some of the same sensibilities that Regan and the Moral Majority espoused. During the Inauguration, Bush spoke to the American people, imploring them to teach their children what it meant to be a “loyal friend; a loving parent; a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood, and town better than he found it” ("George Bush: Inaugural Address"). While his message of community and kindness was seemingly innocuous, Bush, like his predecessor, was determined to allow his jurisdiction to bleed over into the arena of moral responsibility, suggesting that “America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle” (“George Bush: Inaugural Address”). In
his view, that moral principle could not be maintained if Americans did not work hard to maintain it, and for Bush, that meant reforming, in particular, “those who cannot free themselves of enslavement to whatever addiction – drugs, welfare, and demoralization that rules the slums” ("George Bush: Inaugural Address"). Part of Bush’s reformation plan came via the continued “War on Drugs” which found him, in September of 1989, asking Congress for $7.9 billion dollars in the name of his Drug Control Strategy, only 30% of which was aimed at drug education and treatment (“George Bush: Address to the Nation…”). While it is outside the scope of this study to elaborate on the successes and failures of Bush’s plan, a 1992 New York Times article stated that although cocaine use was down by 22 percent since 1989, in the “meanest” neighborhoods, or slums, drug usage had been on the rise since Bush presented his plan to Congress (Treaster).

Bush’s presidency did bring about positive change, however; for example, in 1990, he signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, prohibiting employers from discriminating based on disability. Likewise, when he signed into law the Amendments to the Clear Air Act, also in 1990, he led the nation in taking a step towards heightened environmental safeguards. For all his legislative victories, however, Bush continued Reagan’s legacy of traditional, conservative values that often sacrificed women’s potential empowerment on the altars of propriety and patriarchy.

Anita Hill’s rise to the national spotlight in the 1990s illustrates how a woman’s relentless aggression was a necessary weapon in the fight against the patriarchal limitations reinforced by Bush’s administration, and the attendant perception of masculine superiority that feeds into rape culture and incidents of sexual assault. Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to the United States Court of Appeals in 1990, and to the Supreme Court sixteen months later, making
Thomas the second African-American to fill the post after Thurgood Marshall. Following Thomas’ nomination, Anita Hill, an African-American attorney, submitted a confidential statement to the Senate Judiciary Committee alleging that Thomas had sexually harassed her ten years earlier. The charges were investigated by the FBI and submitted to the Judiciary Committee, and they came back as inconclusive. Two days before the Senate was expected to confirm Thomas’ appointment to the Supreme Court, the Judiciary Committee chose not to pursue the matter. Hill’s rights had been violated, and when she took the matter to the authorities, they opted to allow the crimes committed against her to go unpunished.

Days before Thomas’ confirmation, Hill’s confidential statement was leaked to the press. According to 60 Minutes correspondent Steve Kroft, it was pressure from “women’s groups, and Democrats in the Congress” that led to Hill’s summoning before the Senate Judiciary Committee (Kroft). What followed was a storm of press, speculation, and scandal. Hill, a tenured law school professor at the University of Oklahoma, had worked with Thomas in the Department of Education, and then at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. During her testimony, Hill claimed that, during her time working with Thomas, he had accosted her with talk about “pornographic materials depicting individuals with large penises or large breasts involving various sex acts” (“Testimony to Senate Judiciary Committee”). Hill’s statement, given before fourteen white, male senators, lasted almost nine hours and was an aggressive, unflinching testament of Thomas’ alleged lewd conduct and language. Her demeanor was calm, despite the number of times she had to repeat herself, and throughout the ordeal, she remained polite, gracious, and, above all, unflappable.

While Hill was unflinching and resolute in her testimony, she had essentially been forced to take this aggressive stance; she came before the Senate Judiciary Committee because she was
told to, and it was out of necessity that she showcased such power and agency during the hearing. Still, her testimony was a rallying cry for feminists who had had enough. Though feminism had made great strides in the years and decades leading up to this testimony, the treatment of Hill, be it by Thomas, or the Judiciary Committee, “proved one humiliation too many for female viewers to witness”; there seemed to be a growing consensus amongst American women that “men still ‘don’t get it’” (Faludi xi). Hill’s moment on the stand was one of the most vital in feminist history, as it reminded feminists that the patriarchal impulse to sweep inconvenient truths under the rug meant that women needed to fight openly and aggressively on issues of sexual assault and agency.

Hill is an example drawn from actual social life, similar to Croft and Buffy from fiction, of a woman who wielded aggression in the same fashion as a man; but as her aggression, unlike Buffy’s or Croft’s, legitimately threatened the power of a man, it was not accepted. There were those who, instead of applauding Hill’s aggression in the face of a patriarchal hegemony, shamed her after she assertively defended herself. At the time of the scandal, few believed Hill’s testimony. Polls taken in 1991 showed that twice as many Americans believed Thomas’ denial as Hill’s accusation, and the negative commentary surrounding Hill’s character could be considered as radical as the testimony itself (Eastland et al.). Hill took a polygraph test, designed to question the validity of her allegations, and while she did pass, there was still a great deal of distrust surrounding the evidence she provided.

The night that Hill passed the polygraph, Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah, called into the question the validity of polygraphs and the people who operate them: “I can tell you right now that you can find a polygraph operator for anything you want them for” (Quoted in Tolchin). Despite the polygraph, and numerous other witnesses who waited in the wings to
testify against Thomas, the Senate confirmed his nomination as a Supreme Court justice by a vote of 52-48. While Hill’s fight, and the aggression that fueled it, may seem like a loss to some, there are others, like TheRoot.com’s Cynthia Gordy, who credit Hill's testimony with “galvanizing the ‘Year of the Woman,’” as the 1992 election year following the Thomas hearings saw a record, four women elected to the U.S. Senate, including Carol Moseley Braun, the body's first African American woman. During the same year there was a 68 percent increase – up from 28 to 47 – in the number of women in the House of Representatives. In the five years following the hearings, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reported that sexual harassment claims more than doubled, and awards to sexual harassment victims nearly quadrupled (Gordy). Despite what could be read as advancement in the feminist cause, it’s difficult to ignore some of the statements that have been made concerning Hill. What follows is a partial list of some of the criticisms that have been leveled against Hill since her testimony:

- In her article, “Still Thinking about Anita Hill,” published in 2017, The New Yorker writer Alexis Okeowo reminds readers that, at the time, Anita Hill was accused of betraying the African American race because of her assassination of a black man’s character (Okeowo).

- In 2016, Mollie Ziegler wrote an article entitled “Three Major Problems With ‘Confirmation,’ HBO’s Anita Hill History Rewrite.” As the title suggests, the piece was a critique of the HBO-produced dramatic recounting of the Hill/Thomas scandal. Ziegler not only uses the piece to point to what she considers to be shortcomings with the HBO offering, but to question the integrity of Hill’s claims, so many years later. Ziegler, at the time a senior editor for the
website, questions why Hill had never filed a civil suit or sought a restraining order if she had truly been harassed (Ziegler).

- Philadelphia district attorney, Arlen Spector, who cross-examined Anita Hill during the hearings, has suggested, according to Okeowo, that Hill was “suffering from fantasies about sexual harassment because Thomas had supposedly rejected her” (Okeowo).

- Finally, there is David Brock, who, in a 1992 article for The American Spectator entitled “The Real Anita Hill,” questioned whether Anita Hill was an outright liar, as she was both a “bit nutty, and a bit slutty” (York).

Despite the important stand she took against sexual assault in a testimony that was viewed in more than twenty million households, Hill’s aggression against an established structure of male-centric power, was real, and that meant it was dangerous. Because of this, Hill repeatedly had her name besmirched, her reputation called into question, and her agency challenged.

While the Thomas/Hill scandal affected conversations surrounding workplace harassment, it was not the only scandal that found a woman at the mercy of the media, political pundits, and the patriarchy. When Bush failed to win a second term, William Jefferson Clinton became the 42nd President of the United States. Like Bush, Clinton inherited a budget crisis, but unlike his predecessor, Clinton successfully enacted a plan that addressed America’s economic stumbling. He worked to bolster the lower classes and to place more fiscal responsibility on the upper classes, pairing legislation such as a Medicare payroll tax for individuals with incomes above $135,000 with proposed tax credits for businesses in needy areas (“Clinton’s Economic Plan”). His economic package “passed without a single Republican vote…and despite that party’s dire predictions,” Clinton’s plan lowered the federal deficit “from $290 billion in 1992 to
$203 billion by 1999” (“Bill Clinton”). While many remember Clinton for his political successes, his Presidential legacy is nonetheless marred by sexual scandal.

The scandal that would define Clinton’s presidency began, some would say, during Clinton’s first term in 1995, when a then-22-year-old Monica Lewinsky was hired as a White House intern. It was during this time that Clinton and Lewinski engaged in a romantic relationship that would be the catalyst for the landmark scandal. Lewinski, a Lewis and Clark College graduate, did not voluntarily go public with the details of her relationship with Clinton. Instead, she confided in a co-worker at the Defense Department, Linda Tripp, over the telephone. Unbeknownst to Lewinsky, Tripp was recording their conversations, including the intimate details of the intern’s sexual relationship with President Clinton.

To fully understand the scope of the scandal and Tripp’s motivations, it is important to note that, in 1994, the political magazine The American Spectator, had printed an article entitled: “His Cheatin’ Heart: David Brock in Little Rock.” In the article, Paula Jones, a former Arkansas state employee, claimed that on May 8, 1991, President Clinton, then the Governor of Arkansas, invited Jones to a Little Rock hotel room, where he exposed himself to her and propositioned her for sex. After the story broke, Jones filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against President Clinton.

From 1994-1998, Clinton and Jones were wrapped up in a legal battle. Clinton’s defense team thought it preposterous that Jones believed she had any right to bring a lawsuit against an acting president, and Jones was struggling to keep her legal team together as she rejected settlement offers from Clinton’s camp. In 1998, after disclosing her relationship with the President to Linda Tripp, Lewinsky was called before the court in the Clinton v. Jones case, where she claimed, under oath, that had never had any kind of romantic or sexual relationship with President Clinton. When Tripp discovered that Lewinsky had denied a relationship with
Clinton, she took her recorded conversations with Lewinsky to Kenneth Star, who was investigating political abuse charges within Clinton’s staff. With First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton standing by his side at a White House press conference on January 26th, 1998, Clinton famously denied any allegations of sexual misconduct with Lewinsky: “I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me…I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky” ("Lewinsky Has Spoken").

In July of that same year, Lewinsky’s testimony before a grand jury, complete with the infamous blue dress, created a trail of evidence that prompted an admission of guilt from Clinton on August 17th, 1998. “Indeed, I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure on my part for which I am solely and completely responsible” ("Clinton Admits to ‘Wrong’ Relationship with Lewinsky.”) Because of this admission, Clinton became the second president in American history to be impeached by the House of Representatives.

Both Hill and Lewinsky drew national attention during a time when fictional female aggression was perhaps more present than ever, while actual female aggression was met with derision by many Americans. As Lewinsky told her story, the aggression that she demonstrated as a young woman thrown into a legal proceeding against her will unfortunately drew a great deal of suspicion, anger, and even ridicule from the public. Between January 1998 (the date of Clinton’s denial) and August 1998 (the date of Clinton’s admission), many citizens questioned whether their president had engaged in sexual misconduct. A CNN poll of 1,013 adults, taken between January 30th, 1998 and February 1st, 1998, gave Clinton a 69 percent approval rating, the highest of his presidency, outstripping Ronald Reagan’s highest approval rating ("Clinton's Approval Rating Hits New High.”). The media’s obsession with the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal
was not unlike their fascination with the Thomas/Hill scandal, and they rarely focused on telling Lewinsky’s side of the story, citing her bravery, or vilifying the president.

Lewinsky was a woman who did not want to make her private life public before the world, and she said nothing of the scandal until July of 1998, when she received immunity for the misleading testimony concerning her relationship with Clinton during the *Clinton v. Jones* case. The immunity, secured for herself and her mother, a material witness in the Kenneth Star investigation into the Lewinski allegations, was a unique form of protection called transactional immunity. The acquiring of the transactional immunity, which is defined as “the broadest kind of immunity, excusing any of Lewinsky’s prior conduct in exchange for her testimony” (“Lewinsky Strikes Far-Reaching Immunity Deal”), brought about the surrendering of the now-infamous semen-stained dress which bore the DNA evidence necessary to corroborate her allegations. The fight for immunity, and the securing of it, could be read in much the same way as Fontine’s longing for her lost lover, simple self-preservation, and not a powerful act of aggression. I would argue, however, that Lewinksi’s fight for survival, was also a fight against the repression of a woman’s voice, a woman’s testimony, all of which requires the performance of aggression on the part of Lewinksii as a woman.

Lewinsky’s aggressive act (motivated in part by self-preservation) of testifying against a sitting president was most frequently met with commentary on her looks, intelligence (or lack thereof), and morality (or lack thereof). In this regard, Lewinsky was treated in a manner similar to that of the fictional Sandy from *Grease* and Fantine from *Les Misérables*. When a woman is relegated to the status of an object with little purpose other than to be looked upon, “she is far from unnoticed . . . on the contrary, her body is exposed to vigorous, invasive scrutiny and her attractiveness as seriously debated as the implications of her relationship to [a] man” (Bean 41).
As Lewinsky was often scrutinized as an object rather than as a human being deserving of the public’s trust and empathy, her aggression, her voice, and her agency were all compromised.

What makes this even more troubling is that many feminists were quick to attack Lewinsky. In a 1998 interview in the *New York Observer*, writer Francine Prose interviewed feminist writer Katie Roiphe, who commented on this lack of support: “Mainstream feminists, who you’d think would come out and say, ‘You know, here’s this poor young woman being exploited, let’s take her side,’ they’re not taking her side” (“New York Supergals Love That Naughty Prez”). Lewinsky was not supported by the mainstream feminist community as a woman who fell victim to the sexual advances of the most powerful man in the country; rather, she was ostracized and derided even by some outspoken champions of women’s rights.

This is not, of course, to say that there was no feminist support of Lewinsky. There were those who, as the nation was mulling over the validity of Lewinsky’s claims in 1998, reminded America that Clinton’s past actions lent credibility to her claims. For example, *Vanity Fair* writer Marjorie Williams pointed out that not only had Clinton allegedly dropped his trousers to “waggle his erect penis at a woman [Paula Jones] who held a $6.35-an-hour clerical job in the state government over which he presided,” he also, allegedly, invited a potential employee back to his office where he “fondled her breasts, and placed her hand on his crotch” (Williams). But overall, the aggression and bravery that Lewinsky showed in the face of attacks on her credibility, her intelligence, and her physical appearance were at best ignored or, at worst, treated cavalierly.

One example of such troubling treatment comes from Susan Faludi, whose research regarding the backlash against women in the latter part of the twentieth century has been instrumental to my study. Faludi wrote an article for the *New York Observer* in 1998, describing
Lewinsky and Tripp as women who embraced a fraudulent ideal of “feminism,” manufactured and commodified by the likes of pop music artists like the Spice Girls and Fiona Apple (Faludi). Faludi also drew a troubling distinction between the terms “girl” and ‘woman.” She described Hillary Rodham Clinton as a “woman,” fully in control of what feminism and feminine aggression truly are because she is a “grown up”: “If feminism is about anything, it’s about women growing up. It’s about becoming mature and equal players in public life. It’s about seeing what happened to you in proportion, and about knowing when the public good outweighs you having a temper tantrum in public over a personal offense” (Faludi). While Faludi’s assessment of the First Lady is not off base, it carries with it the implication that Tripp and Lewinsky were, by contrast, only selfish “girls” throwing “temper tantrum[s],” placing personal gratification over the greater public good. This sort of thinking is dangerous, as it seems to suggest that women should refrain from speaking out against injustice when the truth may lead to a messy and inconvenient public uproar. It is, of course, important to note that this article was released in February 1998, less than a month after Lewinsky’s allegations were made public and long before they were proven to be true; I am admittedly working with the benefit of hindsight, but Faludi’s commentary is nonetheless revelatory of the kind of distrust and suspicion Lewinsky faced from feminists and others throughout the proceedings against Clinton.

While I do agree, to some extent, with Faludi’s definition of “grown up” feminism, I take issue with her reference to Lewinsky’s ordeal as little more than “a personal offense.” After claiming that Lewinsky is not the adult that Hillary Rodham Clinton is, Faludi issues a scathing charge to the Lewinskys and Tripps of the nation: “[Y]ou never do anything, it’s all done to you, and so you never have to take responsibility for anything.” Faludi goes on to state that the “Girl Power” movement of the 1990s, a term she uses to refer to Lewinsky’s brand of feminism, was
“all about women staying in that most traditional of feminine roles: enforcers of the public morality, whose power as social conscience derives directly from their political powerlessness” (Faludi). While Faludi’s argument that “Girl Power” feminism does not consider “the advancement of their sex” has some validity, it downplays President Clinton’s actions as inconsequential offenses against “public morality,” rather than as the harmful result of a patriarchal culture that allows abuses of power without repercussion. Though Faludi is, of course, in no way obligated to agree with Lewinsky’s choices, there is something to be said for the fact that Faludi, a mainstream feminist, chose not to call out the blatant misogyny inherent in the way that Lewinsky was represented in the media.

A similar lack of support came from other noteworthy feminists, including Betty Freidan, who was questioned by *Los Angeles Times* interviewer, Elain Woo, on the issue of Vice President Al Gore’s polling numbers:

**Woo:** Recent polls show that Texas Gov. George W. Bush has the edge over Vice President Al Gore among women. What do you make of that?

**Freidan:** Isn't that awful?

**Woo:** Do you think that Gore is suffering from some fallout over the Monica Lewinsky scandal?

**Freidan:** What is that? I can't stand the way you media people just trivialize everything. It's the campaign for the president of the United States. . . . What is your concern with some little twerp named Monica? What has she got to do with the presidential election? That just disgusts me. (Woo)

While Friedan’s disgust for the media’s tendency to drudge up scandal may be understandable, the verbiage is unnecessarily hostile towards Lewinsky. Thirty-seven years prior to this
interview, in *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan had called for a “women’s freedom to participate in the major work and decisions of society as equals of men” (64). During the Lewinsky scandal, however, Friedan, along with many other feminists, struggled to defend Clinton and found themselves “endorsing a politic not unlike conservative anti-feminisms with which they would not ordinarily align themselves” (Bean 41). For the sake of political expedience, feminist icons like Friedan used infantilizing and derogatory language against Lewinsky and downplayed the troubling nature of Clinton’s actions, which had affected not only the “little twerp” they derided, but other women who had worked near Clinton as well. Though Lewinsky had engaged in an affair with a married man and delivered misleading testimony about the affair in court, I contend that her aggressive act of speaking out against the President was met with a disproportionate level of spite and maliciousness from feminists and non-feminists alike. Ultimately, even though Clinton admitted to having an inappropriate sexual relationship with Lewinsky, he was not punished for his wrongdoing; the Senate trial into Clinton’s actions brought about an acquittal of all charges, ending any possibility for Clinton’s removal from office.

There are significant similarities between Hill’s and Lewinsky’s cases. Both women were required to exhibit courageous acts of actual aggression against men who had abused their positions of power. Both women point to a paradoxical time in the 1990s when popular culture’s embracing of female aggression extended only as far as the line between fiction and reality, and both women persisted even though their lives were dissected, often unfairly, by politicians, the news media, and the American public. For many women, the stand that Hill took against Clarence Thomas encouraged openness and transparency in conversations about sexual assault and women’s civil rights. Lewinsky’s place in the 1990s zeitgeist, while a bit more controversial, is no less significant. Like Hill’s case against Thomas, Lewinski’s testimony sparked new
conversations about sexual harassment and abuses of power. While there are significant differences between the circumstances surrounding these two case studies, for the purpose of this study, I am focusing on the parallels between the types of aggression employed in both instances.

Both women exercised aggressive power in the face of great odds and at significant personal cost. Anita Hill’s case against Clarence Thomas pointed to a need for the feminist community to come together in support of a woman whose stand against the patriarchy was publicized to an unprecedented degree. Monica Lewinsky’s testimony against Bill Clinton became a similar site of female aggression, demanding that supporters and detractors alike analyze the ways in which truth, feminism, and patriarchy can be mediatized in damning and destructive ways.

**Wonder Woman: When Aggression Turns to Violence**

As noted in chapter three, in the 1980s, with George Perez helming the title, *Wonder Woman* underwent enormous, positive change. Perez created stories that foregrounded the heroine as a character who not only had incredible powers, but who also enjoyed a great deal of agency and presence. Perez’s vision for Wonder Woman ended in 1992 with the publication of *Wonder Woman* #62, which included a banner that read: “An Era Ends for Wonder Woman.” What followed was yet another redrawing of Wonder Woman’s story arc, one that would upend all that had been established since the 1980s relaunch. Indeed, whereas under Perez’s guidance, Wonder Woman had been a “champion of global peace and cooperation,” with his departure she became “subject to an economy where women were still perceived as more valuable as sexual commodities than as media consumers” (Brown 235). In the 1990s, Wonder Woman was, like Lara Croft, redesigned to appeal to those consumers who were primarily interested in the fetishization of dangerous sexual objects.
Writer William Messner-Loebs took over for Perez in 1992 and was paired with artist Mike Deodato Jr. Tim Hanley offers an apt summary of a change in appearance that occurred under the Messner-Loebs/Deodato authorship:

Wonder Woman had impossibly long legs, and a minuscule waist, breasts that jutted out like torpedoes, and a perpetual sexy glare. She and her fellow Amazonians were always positioned so as to best emphasize their features, and Wonder Woman’s briefs turned in a painful-looking thong that pulled up past her waist. (Hanley loc. 3557)

While hyper-sexualization had always been a major aspect of Wonder Woman’s construction, never had her transformation been so aggressive. Once her physical transformation was complete, her narrative also got a dubious makeover. As I have sought to argue in the course of this chapter, fictional female aggression was becoming a lucrative commodity. This was evident in movie box office numbers, where *Terminator 2* (1991), with Linda Hamilton’s Sarah Connor, earned over 23 million dollars during its opening weekend (“*Terminator 2*”); the following year, *Alien 3* featuring Sigourney Weaver’s alien-killing Ellen Ripley, also earned over 23 million dollars during its premiere weekend (“*Alien 3*”). DC, wanting to capitalize on popular culture’s interest in characters like Connor and Ripley, decided that Wonder Woman needed to become grittier and darker.

In the 1990s, the female superhero became, like Croft, a character who trafficked in overt sexuality and unapologetic violence, morphing into a cross between a stripper and a homicidal killer (Madrid 282). An analysis of female characters from the decade, who bore names such as Lady Death, Fatale, Feral, and Boom-Boom, suggests a return to a now-familiar pattern: that the women of 1990s comic books were granted power and allowed to be aggressive, so long as they
paradoxically peddled familiar masculine aggression and were hyper-sexualized. In sum, superheroines could have power, as long as they adhered to the sex/violence formula that a largely male consumer-led market was driving.

This turn toward extreme violence posed a challenge for the authors of *Wonder Woman* in the 1990s. Throughout the years, whether she was working for the military, as a spy, or as a U.S. Ambassador, Diana’s journey through the Patriarchal World had often, been centered on guiding men away from darkness and violence. While Wonder Woman occasionally used aggression to stave off wrongdoing, she, like Buffy, had always been portrayed as someone who only used her aggression and/or violence out of necessity. Never were readers asked to believe that Diana was capable of the same wanton violence that they might find in a *Batman* comic book. It is important that storylines and events within *Wonder Woman* point to her as a body of positive power, because ideally Wonder Woman, “affirm[s] the rightness of our world,” and she cannot “be permanently shifted from being a positive force” (Freim loc. 3342). Unfortunately, because there is, as Nicole Freim points out in her essay “The Dark Amazon Saga: Diana Meets the Iron Age”, a need for heroes to be “changeable yet unchangeable,” DC’s solution to the question of how to make Diana a darker character in the 1990s resulted in the stripping away of her power and position almost entirely.

This is evident in issue #90 (1994), where *Wonder Woman* readers were first introduced to Artemis, a key figure in Messner-Loebs’ and Deodato’s darker storylines. The introduction of Artemis brings with it some bizarre, albeit necessary, changes to the *Wonder Woman* narrative. Through this character, Messner-Loebs was able to tell stories about violent women without rewriting Diana’s moral makeup.
As the storyline begins, Diana returns to her home of Themyscira to find it abandoned. The abandoned island stands in stark contrast to the vibrant site of sisterhood that Themyscira had been while Pérez was at the helm. Because of a magic spell, Diana’s kin had been whisked away to another dimension for ten years. As fictional interdimensional travel oftentimes dictates, time passed differently for Hippolyta and the Amazonians than it did for Diana; what was years away from Earth and Themescara for Hippolyta and the Amazonians, was only months for Wonder Woman. When she does return, Hippolyta, having been gone so long, questions Wonder Woman about the work that she has done while the Amazonians were away.

**Hippolyta:** So tell me…how does it go? Doubtless women have been freed from their oppression? Men and women enjoy equal respect and worth? You have founded huge movements of women and men to stop violence? (Messner-Loebs “Homeward Gazings” 18)

Diana points out that, while these things have not yet been accomplished, she has created inroads to seeing those important missions through. Hippolyta, who had always been an integral part of Wonder Woman’s support system, is displeased with the fact that the world is not a place free of wrong doing:

**Hippolyta:** So nothing has been done. Nothing. And man’s world is still a sink hole of depravity and injustice.

**Diana:** Mother, that is not fair…. I have protected the innocent and fought the guilty.

**Hippolyta:** You have been a child playing “hero.” Glory-seeking and glorying in the company of males. Enjoying their approval. (Messner-Loebs “Homeward Gazings” 18)
Hippolyta belies her understanding of the human world by suggesting that, even in ten years, Diana could singlehandedly change the courses of oppression, poverty, and violence. This catalyst for Artemis’ upcoming introduction pushes Perez’s message of sisterhood aside, as Hippolyta’s misinformed and nearsighted judgement removes a vital support system from Diana’s story.

A contest is called so that Hippolyta can give the title of Wonder Woman to someone who will properly follow “Amazonian precepts” (18). Artemis, named after the goddess, is one of the Amazonians who partakes in the test of might that is proposed; but the very fact of Artemis’ presence at the contest is troubling. For this storyline, Messner-Loebs created a splinter faction of Amazonians called “The Tribe,” a rebellious group of women who ran away to the “Patriarch’s World” and were corrupted by the evil, violence, and vices they found there. Making Artemis a member of The Tribe was shrewd move that divorces the upcoming darkness and violence found in *Wonder Woman* from the titular character, again guaranteeing that once the need for darkness was met, Wonder Woman’s upright moral code would remain intact.

Artemis’ victory in the contest reads bizarrely, as Diana trips at the finish line and Artemis is given the resources by which to become Wonder Woman, including the iconic armor. The moment of Diana’s transfer of power again points to the stripping of her support network, as Hippolyta bestows Diana’s power on a stranger who had at one time abandoned the sisterhood of Themyscira for the world of man. Speaking to Artemis, Hippolyta declares, “I also accept you into my heart, as a sister – and a Daughter” (Messner-Loebs, “Violent” 1). Thus, Diana does not only lose her armor and weapons, but also her mother, in the name of creating a dark narrative fraught with vestiges of familiar male violence. Moreover, she is shunned for her inadequacy as an Ambassador of the Amazonian way.
As both women are not allowed to exist in the same space, wear the same garb, and carry the same moniker, in 1995’s *Wonder Woman* #93, Diana goes through yet another transformation, sporting a black bra, a dark blue jacket, mini shorts, and a pencil-straight, shoulder-length haircut. Gone are the iconic colors of Diana’s old uniform. She has literally and metaphorically gone dark. This stylistic shift can be viewed as an attempt on the part of the creators to align the character with the morally ambiguous male comic books characters of the time, such as “Venom, Spawn, Deadpool, and Cable,” whose comic books were “selling like crazy” (Freim loc. 3374). Again, Diana, while not Wonder Woman, can embrace a darkness without marring her iconic status as peace-loving hero.

With Wonder Woman’s physical transformation complete, the storylines begin to reflect a significantly grittier, darker tone. This was achieved primarily through the implementation of familiar tropes of violence popular in the 1990s. In issue #93, appropriately entitled “Violent Beginnings,” Artemis takes to the man’s world and fights two super-powered villains. She dispatches one of them by putting an arrow through his head, the character’s blood gruesomely spattering the comic’s panels. The second villain is dispatched when Artemis sends an arrow down the barrel of his weapon, causing the discharged gun to detonate, killing him. Again, as Brown argues, the reader accepts these actions being perpetrated by a woman because her femininity is blended with a recognizable masculinity. *Terminator 2*’s Sarah Connor, for example, wields her weapons with an efficacy that audience members recognized because of the male action heroes, including but not limited to Arnold Schwarzenegger, who trafficked in such genre-defining tropes, particularly in the 1990s. The *Wonder Woman* narratives of 1995 similarly featured a female protagonist whose feminine aggression was little more than the performance of a familiar masculine violence enacted by a hyper-sexualized female body.
Messages such as these can be seen in issue #93 as Artemis, who had been introduced on a TV talk show as the “New Wonder Woman,” was asked by a reporter how her time as Wonder Woman would differ from Diana’s. Artemis dismisses the work that Diana had done in the man’s world:

**Artemis:** My…sister allowed herself to become enmeshed in personality conflicts and side issues…. She has been working in a fast food restaurant for several months…. I think perhaps she does not understand the seriousness of the situation. (Messner-Loebs, “Violent” 17)

Artemis’ interview pushes Diana even further from her role as Wonder Woman, as Diana is painted as a fallen heroine who has not only failed her own people, but the entire world. Artemis goes on to suggest that, since, “aggression and hatred towards women is great evil,” she is going to “end the violence that marred the world’s society” (Messner-Loebs, “Violent” 18). Artemis, who clearly represents a darker vision of Diana fed by outrage at violence against women, is constructed in a paradoxical manner. For as she stands before the world, exuding her feminine aggression while suggesting that she is going to fight for the innocent and stand up against the patriarchy in a way that Diana never did, her agency is undermined by the way in which her words are presented.

While Artemis, is speaking, her idealized body on display, the image of her that is being broadcast in an undisclosed location is suddenly spattered with blood, which dots her face and stretches across her breasts. In the next panel, the reader sees Wonder Woman’s colleague, Micah, being brutally beaten in a bar, and once again the broadcasted image of Artemis is sprayed with blood at her mouth, her shoulder, and her lips. Even if the placement of the blood splatter was not meant to be sexually suggestive, Artemis’ words of power are rendered
negligible as they are overshadowed by sexual imagery and violence.

On the next page, the image shifts; Diana’s friend, private investigator Micah Raines, is bludgeoned at a local bar. Artemis’s image, projected on the television in the background, is slicked with Raines’ blood. Luckily, Diana, hoping to have a conversation with Raines, happens upon the bar at just the right time. When Diana enters the bar, seeing her friend in peril, the two perpetrators scoff at her:

**Thug One:** Don’t worry, she ain’t gonna attack us. That would be revenge. She don’t believe in revenge. And she ain’t even the Wonder Woman anymore.


The Thug’s words call to mind a fact that all seasoned Wonder Woman fans know instinctively – that Wonder Woman does not take part in acts of violence in the name of revenge. In the next panel, Diana, her face contorted with rage, suggests that the villains have the “wrong idea” about her (19). What follows are two pages in which Diana beats both men, displaying violence unprecedented for the character, but common in male-centric comic books like Marvel’s *Wolverine*, DC’s *Batman*, or Image’s *Spawn*. Meanwhile, each panel of action draws the reader’s gaze to Diana’s breasts, her silhouetted legs, her muscular arms, or her spandex-clad buttocks.

Here, Wonder Woman and Lara Croft fall into the same category: 1990s heroines who are remarkably powerful and capable of great violence, all while being sexualized. Absent from Diana’s dialogue or actions is any suggestion that her duty as an ambassador within the world of men is informing her violent actions. What the reader is given, instead, is a Wonder Woman who seems to revel in the violence and destruction she is inflicting. As Wonder Woman is a superpowered individual, it goes without saying that she could have dispatched Micah’s captors
with relative ease. What took place instead was a violent collage of bloody images, in which the blood of Micah’s attackers is smeared about the bar as Diana goes to work breaking their bodies.

Neither Micah nor Hawkman, a fellow member of the Justice League who interacts with Diana shortly thereafter, balk at the heroine’s bloody encounter. As the “Wonder Woman” moniker had already been stolen from her, this violent act was not, technically, perpetuated by Wonder Woman; therefore, it is framed as acceptable within the Wonder Woman universe. In sum, Messner-Loebs was able to have Diana traffic in masculine violence, a lucrative trope of the 1990s, without marring the good name of Wonder Woman.

Artemis’ seven-issue stint in the Wonder Woman title, and the attendant inclusion of a new and violent Diana, culminated in issue #100 (1995), in which Artemis met her end in a gratuitously violent death scene that comprised twelve of the issue’s thirty-eight pages. While Diana does come to her aid in a brutal battle against demonic foes, the brunt of the enemies’ violence is aimed at the new Wonder Woman. By the end of the encounter, Diana is battle-worn and bloody, but Artemis’s journey to her death begins with her being punched repeatedly, every image of her attack by the enormous, male, humanoid demon focused on her face, which is covered in her own sweat, blood, and the cream-colored, viscous saliva of her attacker. As the battle escalates, the attacks from the enemy result in the gradual ripping away of Artemis’ Wonder Woman costume. When the enemies think Artemis defeated, she tries to save Diana, but the arrows that she lets loose against the monsters are redirected, piercing her own body instead. The enemies mock the struggling Artemis for trying to remove the “stingers,” and they proceed to rip them from her body themselves. The demon-powered “White Magician” then ensnares Artemis with the Lasso of Truth, and slings her about like a child’s toy, smashing her into one wall after another. After Diana rallies and defeats the Magician and his minions, the reader is
invited to gaze on Artemis’ barely clothed, blood-drenched body. The hero’s breasts are covered with only a suggestion of material, while the strip of fabric that covers her pelvis is so slight that the shadowing between Artemis’ legs looks as if it could be pubic hair. In her final moments, Artemis, held by the distraught Diana, relinquishes the power that she had usurped from the original Wonder Woman: “Take back your uniform, Diana. I have dishonored it. My ambition and arrogance nearly got us both killed. You are Wonder Woman” (Messner-Loebs, “Blank” 37).

The revelation of Diana’s new costume in #93 was the birth of a “dark Wonder Woman” and Artemis’ passing was the metaphoric death of Wonder Woman’s darkness. The end of Diana’s dark story arc comes as no surprise as every chapter of this study had highlighted the fact that, as Freim points out, Wonder Woman is changeable yet unchangeable, always returning to her iconic uniform and traditional moral path.

Two issues before Artemis’ bloody death, Messner-Loebs had begun preparing audiences for Artemis’ death and Diana’s reinstatement; in Wonder Woman #98 (1995), it is revealed that Hippolyta, in another turn that threatened notions of sisterhood, had lied about the winner of the contest that temporarily cost Diana the title of “Wonder Woman.” A mournful Hippolyta admits to her daughter that, “I knew that to save you, I would have to have a new Wonder Woman, one who was not as necessary to the survival of the Amazonians” (Messner-Loebs, “The Rest of…” 22). Thus, Hippolyta believed it was imperative that the mantle of Wonder Woman be passed on to someone who was expendable, someone who was not her own daughter. This act not only casts Hippolyta as a dishonest and selfish matriarch to the Amazonians, but it also speaks to the reason DC had gone in a darker direction with the Wonder Woman title in the first place: profit.

As sales often dictate the direction of storylines, Messner-Loebs made a move that, while not officially documented as such, can be read as a failsafe, or an attempt to steer audiences back
to the familiar heroine they recognized in the name of garnering more sales when the time was right. Hippolyta’s *deus ex machina*-style admission of deceit was constructed in a way that conveniently allowed the creators to render Artemis insignificant when public interest in Artemis-heavy issues of *Wonder Woman* started to wane. To that end, the Messner-Loebs-led team was able to de-throne Diana as Wonder Woman, to have her exist in the same violent arenas that her male counterparts inhabited, and then to re-instate Diana, all without having her to besmirch her good name as the “real” Wonder Woman. The cover of *Wonder Woman* #101 once again finds Diana in her traditional costume, and that fact that Messner-Loebs was soon replaced as the writer on *Wonder Woman* suggests that DC’s exploration of a hyper-violent Wonder Woman would be short-lived. In issue #101, entitled “Second Genesis,” Wonder Woman sets about dispatching evil as she had before, but the issue’s artists do not include any blood in the panels depicting her exploits, and her violence is once again depicted as righteous, rather than gratuitous.

Wonder Woman’s adventures in the 1990s, called for her adapt to the rise of female aggression within popular culture. DC’s desire to profit from the rise of violent female aggression in fictional narratives, had Diana taking on a Batman-esque vigilantism that was acceptable because, like the aggression showcased by Buffy and Laura Croft, it was fictional. More importantly, however, is the fact that Wonder Woman’s turn to the dark in the 1990s did not threaten Diana as it was constructed as temporary, and it was not exacted by the “real” Wonder Woman but instead Artemis, or in the case of Diana’s violent acts, was performed at a time when she was not actually Wonder Woman. Thus, while in the 1990s the characters of Lara Croft and Buffy both functioned, on some level, as a site of masculine violence, Diana’s foray
into negative feminine aggression, was acceptable because not only was it recognizable but also because it was temporary.

**Closing the Chapter on the 1990s**

The studies in this chapter demonstrate that during the 1990s the exercise of positive aggression was on the rise, not only for fictional characters like Buffy and Lara Croft, but also for women who struggled in real life to fight for their own welfare, and that of their families, as well as for the greater good. While stories such as those portrayed in the *Tomb Raider* video game and in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* featured powerful female characters, they also serve as evidence that aggressive women are often only allowed to exist within the action-adventure genre when they are fictional, and fetishized, dispatching violence like men while remaining unthreatening to the patriarchal status quo. While popular culture was embracing a troubled narrative of fictional feminine aggression, Anita Hill’s story spoke to the kind of actual, necessary aggression that could bring feminist communities together. Monica Lewinsky’s story, on the other hand, created a great deal of division, as she was viciously criticized by both women and men, feminists and non-feminists. The first half of the 1990s also gave us a Wonder Woman who was, if only briefly, transformed from ambassador to leather-clad bar-brawler.

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that, during the 1990s, the message of female aggression was becoming more prevalent, during an era that was still very much charged with the conservative sentiment of the previous decade. The fictional female action-adventure hero and comic book character, while aggressive, could only embrace traditionally male-centric attributes of aggression if that aggression did not transgress traditional notions of femininity, violence, or the patriarchy. In the cases of television’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and video game heroine Lara Croft, the violence was familiar, and the threat was fictional, thus making their
aggression acceptable. In the cases of Anita Hill and Monica Lewinski, however, there was aggression that threatened to upend men in positions of power, making actual female aggression something for the patriarchal hegemony to oppress. Taken together, these case studies from the 1990s provide yet more examples of powerful women and powerful messages that, while present and widely visible, were made somewhat absent by virtue of their paradoxical constructions.
CONCLUSION: THE PARADOX, POSTMORTEM?

From the 1960s to the 1990s, American popular entertainments produced many unforgettable female characters, many of whom ostensibly enjoyed levels of power and independence unknown by their fictional predecessors. These characters reflected events in many ways that inform a more nuanced understanding of widespread attitudes towards women and women’s rights during these dynamic decades. In this conclusion, I briefly revisit a few of the real life and fictional examples I explicated in the body of this study, in an effort to highlight how much has changed in the first decades of the current century – and how much regrettably remains the same.

An analysis of the cultural texts – and, by extension, the performances – of both fictional and non-fictional women from the 1960s to the 1990s uncovers some paradoxes in the ways in which women have traditionally been represented. To that end, this dissertation constitutes an analysis of a broad cross-section of female performers, be they characters in genre fiction, or history-makers in the cultural and political arenas. The case studies were aimed to grapple with the following question: When, how, and why has the female performer’s potential to exercise power been muted by contradictory representative practices that dull or limit it? Of course, as the foregoing study makes clear, this key question gives rise to even more questions concerning the creation, manipulation, and monetization of performances of womanhood, the bolstering of patriarchal power, and the backlash against female aggression.

In my investigation into representations of female power in the 1960s that is the focus of chapter one, I interrogated the treatment and representation of the post-World War II woman, a woman who, during a time of devastating war, proved herself capable of thriving in workplace roles traditionally relegated to men, and yet was thrust back into the domestic sphere when the
soldiers came home. I sought to address the question of how popular television shows and *Wonder Woman* comic books in the 1960s upheld the troubled and traditional gender norms that Betty Friedan surveyed in *The Feminine Mystique*. My central case study included an examination of William Moulton Marston’s initial creation of Wonder Woman, as well as the *Wonder Woman* stories written by Robert Kanigher in the 1960s. While suggesting that Wonder Woman was as powerful as her male counterparts, Kanigher muted her power by writing her as an emotionally weak, romance-obsessed heroine longing for a life of domesticity with Steve Trevor. While Betty Friedan’s *Mystique* was decrying the regulation of the American woman’s power and potential, Wonder Woman’s paradoxical positioning found her seeking out a life free of her work as a superheroine, content to neglect her destiny for the love of Trevor.

Has the conversation concerning domesticity and woman’s role in the workplace changed since the 1960s? The findings in chapter one suggested a need to reevaluate women’s contributions as homemakers and members of the American workforce, and the relevance of this issue carries on today. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Mark DeWolf wrote that 74.6 million women are a part of the U.S. civilian labor force, and that 47 percent of U.S. workers are women. While these numbers illustrate the strong presence of women in the American workplace, CNN business correspondent Kathryn Vasel asserts that, “Women earned 79.6 cents for every dollar men made in 2015. . . . Labor Department data shows women earned about 82 cents for every dollar a man made in 2016” (Vasel). Thus, while a woman today may be permitted access to traditionally male-dominated workspaces, that access still does not guarantee her equal compensation for equal work. This discrepancy between the work a woman does, and the monetary value placed on such work points back to the paradox I examined in my first chapter: that while women have, for decades, increasingly taken on more and more work that
was once reserved for men, the push for equality has not yet resulted in equal compensation or recognition.

Conversations about a woman’s role in the home and the workplace led to increasingly visible movements for women’s rights in the late 1960s and 1970s, movements which bore a strong influence on the popular culture of the day. In chapter two, I examined the sexual revolution of the 1970s and address how it prompted new ideas about women’s sexual rights, sexual health, and freedom of sexual expression. Women’s rights groups such as the National Organization of Women were fighting for women to receive equal pay, more comprehensive health benefits, and autonomy over their own bodies, but with this progress came another paradox; as women pioneered a path towards greater sexual freedom, many popular patriarchal narratives sought to exploit rather than to empower.

Tracing this paradox into the realm of popular culture, I examined the movie Grease, focusing specifically on its representation of female sexuality. Using Victor Turner’s theory of the Social Drama, I highlighted the ways in which Sandy’s role, as a virginal interloper within an already-established community, mirrored the political and cultural moves that the women’s rights movement was making during the 1970s. I argued that, at its heart, the narrative of Grease supports a woman’s freedom to explore and express her sexuality only on the condition that, ultimately, she succumbs to the advances of her leading man. While Sandy’s initial resistance to Danny’s advances may have evoked notions of sexual autonomy, the film concluded with a strong implication that she was, in fact, longing to be relentlessly pursued by a man unto the point of submission, thus echoing the anti-feminist backlash that was circulating throughout popular culture in the 1970s.

As I write this conclusion in the first months of 2018, I am lead to consider how issues of
sexual freedom and choice align with the unprecedented number of sexual assault allegations gaining exposure throughout the entertainment industry. Award-winning producer Harvey Weinstein has been accused of eighty-four cases of “inappropriate to criminal behavior ranging from requests for massages to intimidating sexual advances to rape” (Moniuszko). Emboldened and incensed by the Weinstein scandal (and scandals of a similar nature reaching all the way to the highest office in the nation), victims have begun coming forward in unprecedented numbers with sexual assault allegations targeting some of the most influential men in America. While the sexual revolution of the 1970s may have provided a great many women with a platform for discussions of choice and sexual expression, the Weinstein scandal demonstrates that, decades later, the patriarchy still regularly wrests power from women by means of sexual oppression and exploitation.

It should be noted, however, that while women are still fighting a stifling system of power, public awareness surrounding sexual assault and harassment against women is occupying a larger space in the American social consciousness than it has previously. Movements are being created for the sole purpose to exposing the crimes perpetrated by high profile sexual predators. What is troubling, however, is that even in this, the fight for a woman’s sexual rights, a paradox has been encouraged. While causes such as social media movements “Me Too” and “Time’s UP” encourage speaking out against sexual assault and harassment, these high-profile sites of social media activism tend to neglect the stories of the women of color within the United States. So while it is true that the social movements of today have positively contributed to the always-important conversations surrounding sexual assault against women, it is also true that such activism, while vitally important, presently lacks the power to incite widespread change due to the exclusion of the marginalized who have suffered.
I continued my study of patriarchal control in chapter three, as I looked to the increasing backlash against the feminist movement in the Reagan Era of the 1980s. While the conservative pushback against the strides made by feminism in the 1970s was a boon to Reagan and the Moral Majority, there were those who, like superstar Madonna, both resisted and reinforced troubled representations of female sexuality that bolstered male-dominated systems of power. It is that bolstering of male power, built on the sacrifice of the bodies, beliefs, and betterment of powerful women, that provided the paradoxical framework for this chapter.

An examination of *Les Misérables*, the lucrative mega-musical that hit Broadway in 1986, demonstrates that popular entertainments may provide insight into prevailing popular opinions on potentially divisive issues. The popularity of *Les Misérables* in America speaks to its audience’s acceptance of two-dimensional female characters who are used to promote patriarchal power. The musical’s handling of female representation is not troubling because of a lack of female characters; rather, the central representational paradox lies in its mishandling of those characters, Fantine, Cosette, and Eponine. The musical misses an opportunity to frame these aggressive women, who demonstrate courage and cunning as they strategize to get what they want and need, as independent agents. Instead, whether they seek romance or survival, these characters are forced to desperately seek out the approval or assistance of men. This compulsory need for help or validation from men casts the male characters, such as Marius and Jean Valjean, as the noble, respectable saviors of the women who clamor after them.

To offer a contemporary example of this paradox – the propping up of patriarchal power through the subjugation of potentially powerful women – I need look no further than to the national political arena, specifically to the role of the President of the United States in 2017. Long before Weinstein’s scandals began dominating the headlines, businessman-turned-
president Donald John Trump had several sexual assault charges leveled against him. As of December 2017, fifteen women had come forward accusing the 45th President of the United States of “serial misconduct and perversion” (Merica). In December of 2017, while three of President Trump’s accusers were being interviewed on NBC News’ Megyn Kelly Today, the White House released a statement regarding the allegations:

These false claims, totally disputed in most cases by eyewitness accounts, were addressed at length during last year’s [2016’s] campaign, and the American people voted their judgment by delivering a decisive victory. . .. The timing and absurdity of these false claims speaks volumes and the publicity tour that has begun only further confirms the political motives behind them” (Relman).

To this, one of the accusers, Samantha Holvey, responded, “We're private citizens, and for us to put ourselves out there to try and show America who this man is and especially how he views women, and for them to say 'meh, we don't care,' it hurts” (Relman).

The White House’s fallacious suggestion that a political victory somehow proves the President’s innocence may be absurd, but it points to a troubling reality. Despite the number of sexual assault claims against him, Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election; in this case, it seems that alleged sexual assault against multiple women is not sufficient cause to unseat patriarchal power. Trump’s power is effectively being propped up on efforts to invalidate calls for justice against sexual assault; thus, the 1980s paradox I pointed to is still alive and well in the second decade of the 21st century.

While the first three chapters of my dissertation were concerned with women fighting for what they needed to survive (employment, health benefits, sexual freedom, etc.), my final chapter’s focus centered on an analysis of female aggression. This phenomenon was not hard to
track in the 1990s, as some of the biggest movies and television shows featured the performances of female characters who took on the aggressive characteristics that had fueled male-centric action adventure narratives for decades. The female leads of movies like *Terminator 2* and television shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* were lauded as independent and tough, subverting traditional representations of female power; at the same time, they were paradoxically fetishized as sexual objects, thus reinforcing troubled representations of female sexuality. In the 1990s, the most popular cinematic representations of female aggression were accepted by audiences largely because they featured female characters like Buffy Summers and Lara Croft, who distributed the same kinds of violence that American audiences were accustomed to seeing perpetrated by male characters. Fighting prowess aside, the sexual fetishization of these two heroines (particularly Lara Croft) paradoxically muted their power.

My investigation into the representational paradox of female aggression led to an examination of two of the most notable women of the 1990s, Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky. Theirs was easy aggression to track, as both women were subjected to a great deal of scrutiny by the American public, and both were vilified and humiliated on a large scale. In analyzing the case studies of my two fictional subjects alongside my research on Hill and Lewinsky, I asked: How has the aggression of the vampire-slaying Buffy earned the character unmitigated praise, while Monica Lewinsky’s aggressive acts cast her as a villain in the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal? It is through the buffer of the fictive that Buffy and Lara Croft can be examined and accepted, because theirs is an aggression than can never topple non-fictional structures of power. Lewinsky and Hill were disparaged because of the threat they posed to actual male-centric power structures, a fact that highlights the paradox I explore in this chapter—that female aggression is acceptable only on the condition that it is familiar and non-threatening.
Today, one of the greatest examples of female aggression in popular entertainment is Patty Jenkins’ film adaptation of *Wonder Woman* (2017). With an estimated global box office of $821,763,408, (“Wonder Woman”) at the time of this writing, the film had the best opening weekend of any female-directed film in history and is the highest-grossing live-action film directed by a woman (Foutch). While many critics and fans praise the film, *The New Yorker’s* Richard Brody called it “an entry into the genre of wisdom literature…that shares long-pondered paradoxes of the past with a sincere intimacy” (Brody). The film’s popularity stems, in part, from the fact that it showcases female aggression in a familiar and non-threatening way.

Though the iconic Wonder Woman costume has been updated somewhat, the 2017 film still finds Diana racing into battle against ballistic weapons and tanks in little more than a miniskirt and thigh-high boots. And along with a costume that feeds the male gaze comes a familiar romantic narrative that defines Diana’s rise to power on non-threatening terms. In Jenkins’ version of the story, Trevor joins Diana on a journey that takes the duo from Themyscira to the “man’s world” of 1918 London. Trevor, who begins the film as Diana’s guide, inevitably becomes her lover as well. By the end of the film, Diana is empowered, not by her own strength, or by the strength of the sisterhood that she left behind on Themyscira, but by the love she feels for Trevor as he sacrifices himself in the name of saving the world.

Inarguably, Wonder Woman doles out a great deal of positive aggression throughout the film. Even though Diana’s physical altercations were reminiscent of what audiences experienced while watching other male-centric films such as *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Captain America* (2011), however, Jenkins’ failing is not in the conveyance of Diana’s power, but in the patriarchal presence of Trevor. Trevor, the hero who finds time to brag about his penis between exploits, can frequently be found either apologizing for, corralling, guiding, or interpreting for
Diana from the moment the two heroes meet. Thus, despite all that has changed in the decades since her origination in the 1940s, Diana’s power is still, disappointingly, largely dependent on a man.

Like many of the other case studies in my dissertation, this latest incarnation of Wonder Woman provides viewers with a striking example of female power, but, like the others, it demonstrates that popular depictions of female power are rarely sites of genuine, unadulterated female empowerment. An examination of the evidence I have provided, dictates that a change must be made regarding representations of feminine power. Taken together, these results suggest that new texts must be written, new performances constructed, and old scenarios retooled. Female characters must be constructed in such a way so as not to be defined by their romantic entanglements. Heroines who are exploited for their sexuality can no longer be extolled as feminist icons. Primarily, this research provides important insights into a need to reexamine our culture’s acceptance and/or tolerance of female aggression. The success of *Wonder Woman*, while considered by some a triumph, is limited in the change that it can incite because of the fictional world in which Diana exists.

In the end, highlighting this and the other paradoxes in the study, leads to an important question which requires consideration for the future: How do we move past focusing solely on the paradoxes that materialize in this study? How do we move past signs and symptoms and move on to the cause or root, the difficult to deconstruct institution of the patriarchy? The answer, while troubling, is that these paradoxes, linked as they are to patriarchy, have proven impossible to solve. Just when it seems like progression has been made, we come to see that paradox is still powerfully evident; only the terms throughout the decades of this study have changed. While this seems a bit fatalistic, it highlights goals for the future. To truly celebrate
female aggression, not only must it be accepted and cultivated in the non-fictional world, but we need to balance a focus on paradox with a focus on the institution of patriarchy that gives the structure of the paradox its continuing powers. My hope is that this study can be used as a tool to allow deeper insight into these important inquiries.
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