"Wonder Woman, a True "Woman of Valor?" 1
It’s a Man’s World (Pérez 1992) 2

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INTRODUCTION

Wonder Woman.. [is] .. one of the best known, longest lasting, and most controversial characters in the history of comics, ..[she] .. has always been obliged to play a dual role. ..keeping a large audience entertained with her exploits .. [and] .. serve as an .. example for her entire gender .. (Daniels 2000: 11)

Born of a committee and allocated a hotchpotch of attributes, Wonder Woman, the immortal and magical born-of-women “woman,” is very human. Challenging culture-wide expectations of women’s and men’s roles, as men see her she is a “real woman”—sexy—and a good “mother”—caring and dependable. Her creators could not help themselves.

WONDER WOMAN

Early in 1941 and just after Pearl Harbor, Elizabeth “Sadie” Holloway Marston “seeded” her husband William’s “egg,” a comic book superhero. “Make her a woman she said (Bostonia 2001/2006).”3 Initially called Suprema, Wonder Woman was “gestated” and “birthed” by Elizabeth and William Marston, and Olive Byrne, their live-in aficionada. 4, 5, 6 Based on Greek/Hellenic legends of the heroic Amazons, Wonder Woman is an icon, a child of men’s minds—an “Athena” born of Zeus’ “brain.”

Referring to the Graeco-Roman stories of the Amazons, Abby Wettan Kleinbaum comments on ways men through the ages wrote about women warriors. Here is what she has to say about Wonder Woman’s male creators. 7
Never in praise of women the Amazon is a dream that men created, an image of a superlative female that men constructed to flatter themselves. .. [she is] .. strong, competent, brave, fierce, lovely and desirable .. a suitable opponent for the most virile of heroes. .. Thus men told of battling Amazons to enhance their sense of their own worth and historical significance. (Kleinbaum 1986:1)

Mary R. Lefkowitz elaborates on Abby Wetton Kleinbaum’s comments. When battling the Amazons the Greeks portrayed themselves as perennial winners.

For all their strength and skill, the Amazons always lose Their battles against male heroes, especially if they are Greeks. (Lefkowitz 1990: 20)

Drawing primarily from the Amazon legends, Wonder Woman’s architects made her immortal and born thousands of years ago. 8 Shaped from earth and water by her “mother” Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, and given life by the goddesses Athena (Roman) and Aphrodite (Greek), once raised to adulthood, she never ages and never dies.

A true child of men’s minds, Princess Diana’s/Diana Prince’/Wonder Woman’s persona and her adventures have, since her appearance in 1941, been defined by the imaginations of her cadre of “nannies”—mostly male artists and story writers (Emad 2006). 9, 10 Thanks to them, Wonder Woman enjoys superhuman as well as magical powers. But she is also limited by her “nannies’” male imaginations and fantasies. They require us to suspend logic, judgment, and moral principles.

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Idealism! Honesty! Truth! The end justifies the means?

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Invented to fit into a sexist world, Wonder Woman’s male au pairs force her to “fall in love” with a human hero, a pilot who crash-landed on Paradise Island, the hidden Amazon stronghold. The Wonder Woman-to-be, Princess Diana, disobeys her mother and queen. She uses subterfuge to win the right to carry her beloved via her invisible
airplane to his home in the Men’s Worlds. And she is obliged to stay near him, behaving like a lovesick teen.

Through further deception and fraud, the Amazon princess achieves her required desire: to remain near her darling. In the name of love, she is required to become a criminal. She purchases the identity of a nurse named Diana Prince. This woman is also required to commit a crime. In later issues, she marries/doesn’t marry him. Periodically she is forced to choose between her mother and the human worlds, between marriage and the single life. Negotiation. Cooperation. Consensus. Ignored. Not even considered. Either/or fallacies exploding in all directions.

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Reviewing Terry Dodson’s, Drew Johnson’s, Paco Diaz’s and Jodi Picoult’s *Wonder Woman: Love and Murder*, Min Jin Lee values Jodi Picoult’s scripts and her dedication to the 60+ years of puerile conflicts Wonder Woman has been subjected to.

In these inevitable crises, our heroine must choose among many conflicting identities - loyal Amazon princess, civil servant, good daughter to a virtuous, controlling mother - and defender of the flawed but lovable (!) human race. (Lee 2008: 1)

Is Wonder Woman respecting her upbringing? Does she do her best to fit into the men’s worlds? Can it be she is a true Woman of Valor?

*EYESHET ḤAYIL*, WOMAN OF VALOR (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Another “girl” child of men’s minds, this one is attributed to King Solomon. Unlike Wonder Woman, the “Woman of Valor” does not appear to have even a modicum of “womanly” input into her creation. Wonder Woman at least enjoyed the participation of a few women scriptwriters, colorists, pencil, pen, and letterers, and, since 1979, the dedicated ministrations of her long-time editor, Karen Berger. The “Woman of Valor” never grows beyond the confines of her original literary characterization. She is commented upon variously by religious men who purportedly glorify her in writing, but

Woman of Valor is fixed in time—2,000-plus years old since her appearance—and likely to remain unchanged for another 2,000 years. Why? Because she is already “perfect.” That is to say, perfect for men. The responsibility for manifesting those characteristics 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, until she dies is the responsibility of every Jewish woman. Just as learning is “men’s work,” serving men and making their lives easy is “women’s work.”

Man’s overriding goal in life is to diligently apply himself to the study of Torah, therein meriting a portion in the World to Come. Man can only do this when he is not saddled with the mundane details of daily existence. To that end God created woman as his helpmate, who enables him to achieve the time and peace of mind he so desperately needs; .. God created them a single unit, thus generating in woman an innate tendency to tend to the needs of her husband (exactly as she tends to her own – for they are as one). (Rubin 1999: 26)

A proper Jewish woman must accept the demands explicated in those verses, to model herself on and confine herself to the strictures itemized in the Eyshet Ḥayil.

Eysheth Ḥayil, A Woman of Valor is patched onto the end of Proverbs. The raggedy tail of twenty-two lines it is a poorly constructed poem. In alphabetic order, each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its structure is a waʿf, “an Arabic word meaning ‘description,’ a list or catalogue (Bernat 2004:328, 330)” of traits, usually physical. 11 Like Wonder Woman, Eysheth Ḥayil is defined by deeds, which explicate and reflect her obligations to her owner. These deeds are described in great detail.

The subject of these verses is the Jewish man’s ideal Jewish woman: mother, major domo, housefrau, money- and baby-making machine. He will give up beauty for comfort. The “Eysheth Ḥayil” must dedicate her life to serving her owner. She is ‘aqérēth
habáyith/ the housewife or to paraphrase Rabbi Yosi who is fond of saying “I refer to my wife as “my house (Talmud Bavli, Gittin, 52a).”

Woman’s intended role being that of cornerstone and mainstay of home and family, .. the very essence of her existence. (Rubin 1999: 41)

“Heroic” perhaps, but in very different ways from her sister Wonder Woman.

**EYESHET ḤAYIL, AN ELABORATION OF SEDER NASHIM, THE MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN**

In Talmudic law a woman is a qinyan, an animate item of ‘moveable property,’ owned first by her parents until they transfer her to another owner, usually the one who has paid for exclusive sexual and other property rights—her so-called “husband (Dahbany-Miraglia, 1999).”

Eysheth Ḥayil is required to glory in being responsible for preserving of her owner’s home, presenting him with healthy children, particularly boys, and caring of all who reside therein. She services her owner’s physical, economic, emotional needs and desires as well as those of his entire household. Her needs, desires, dreams, talents are never mentioned, much less considered. A Stepford wife (Levin 1972).

Except for the single characteristic they share—as creations of men’s minds—it appears that Wonder Woman—the warrior—and “Eysheth Ḥayil”—the slave—are diametric opposites.

WONDER WOMAN, WOMAN OF VALOR?

Pearl Harbor (Sunday 12/7/41) and World War II were fortuitous. William Moulton introduced Wonder Woman to Max Gaines, cofounder of All-American Publications who gave him the go-ahead to develop Wonder Woman further. 12

To make her palatable to girls, Wonder Woman’s storyboard writers and artists had to move away from servicing male needs only. Wonder Woman’s nannies had to make her “womanly,” e.g. create a love interest, “motherly,” take care/rescue people, and make sure she appeared to be a “girls’ girl.” She had to be able to associate with girls who would like her, help her, and emulate her with minimal jealousy.

At the same time, they had to be careful not to turn off the boys, the majority of comic book readers. The boys required heroic acts, beating up the “bad guys.” A tall order. As Wonder Woman’s continued popularity demonstrates, they succeeded exceptionally well.

But is Wonder Woman a true woman of valor? There is no doubt that she is a warrior, apparently the polar opposite of Solomon’s model. An Amazon, she is born free and raised in a woman’s universe. Men’s worlds were beyond her ken and outside her existence until her flyboy fell into her lap, so to speak. An immortal who enjoys superhuman strength, physically and mentally, she can protect, defend, and rescue herself and others. No man owns her. She is no man’s “house.”

Since her creation, Wonder Woman served and continues to serve the needs of others. She rescues men (and some women) from their foolishness. Her biggest challenges are those involving men—in war and making war. Wonder Woman picks up after them, cleans up their messes, and maintains a constant vigilance for damage control. She is a good mum.
Yet, Wonder Woman has much in common with the *Eysheth Hayil*. Both are idealizations. In common with her Jewish prototype, she is accomplished in many arts. She protects the weak and helps the poor. Others call upon her to resolve situations they cannot handle. In that respect Wonder Woman is the “house” of the “flawed but lovable human race (Lee 2008: 1).”

Both are man-made creations emerging in men’s worlds to serve men’s needs. The slave woman—woman of valor—is real. She is every Jewish woman who accepts men’s demands/standards of obedience, reinvented by innumerable living women who, for more than 2,000 years have learned to transform themselves, even revel in their voluntary enslavement, their joyous servitude. Successful socialization/brainwashing.

The responsibility for conforming and for making decisions, mistakes, corrections, is, as they say in Arabic, “*on their heads,*” عَلَى كُلِّ فِيْهِنّ. An impossible trap. Slave and slave master are one.

Wonder Woman is a great exemplar. Human women can admire her, gain courage from her struggles and achievements. But they can emulate her only in mind and heart. If they fall a bit short, it is no big deal. No human woman is expected to BE Wonder woman. Like *Eysheth Hayil*, Wonder Woman is immutable. She is created and recreated by many men and a few obedient women.

A template with occasional wavy edges, only Wonder Woman is subject to the vagaries of passing fancies of time and place—as defined by her mostly male creators—and to the ebb and flow of deeply entrenched prejudices.

Woman of valor is an immutable, impossible template which living Jewish women labor mightily to fit.

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The Chinese have a saying: “Women carry hold up half the sky.” I add:

“And they carry the world on their backs.”
POSTSCRIPT

It may appear that this paper is metaphorically the equivalent of smashing a mosquito with a sledgehammer. I respectfully disagree. It is a vigorous attempt to shake up a bit, perhaps make a dent—metaphorically speaking—in the war-driven man-made worlds. Let’s add a bit of yeast to the dough. Matzah is for Pesah. 13, 14

NOTES

1 Thanks to Maria Isabel Fernandes, Marie Gilav, Natasha Johnson, Marcia Kovler and Sandy Marcus of Queensborough’s library, and to Sylvia Cho, Brenda Gomez, Jessica McGivney and Beth Posner of CUNY’s Graduate Center library for their unfailing skills and kindnesses locating books and articles so quickly! Gratitude to QCC’s IT mavens: Ralph Romanelli, Terry Cho & Jose Rodriquez. More thanks go to the wonderful three of CUNY’s MEMEAC for their constant support: Beth Baron, Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr.

2 Commenting on the late 1980s and early 1990s, Les Daniels writes “In Wonder Woman, the most innovative Pérez scripts eschewed such heroic exploits in favor of dramas concerning Diana’s exploration of modern society, described as Man’s World or Patriarch’s World (2000:178-179).”

3 In February 1941, William Moulton Marston sent in a script of Suprema, the Wonder Woman to Sheldon Mayer, editor of All-American Comics (Bunn 1997: 106-107). Aka Charles Moulton he was teamed up with veteran artist Harry G. Peter, a very successful move.

4 The Marstons shared an unusual life for that time. When William was out of work (which was often) Elizabeth, also a psychologist was the only breadwinner. In 1933, “Elizabeth landed a position as assistant to the chief executive of Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in New York. (Bostonia 1997/2004).”

5 Olive Byrne, one of William’s students from Tufts University, lived with the Marstons from the 1920s until her death in the 1980s. Olive took on the housekeeping and childrearing while Elizabeth supported the family and William worked on Wonder Woman. The three had four children. Pete and Olive Ann came from Elizabeth, Byrne and Donn from Olive. Olive’s children were formally adopted by Elizabeth and William (Daniels 1997/2004: 31).

6 Olive Byrne appears to have been the model for Wonder Woman. Slender, with a heart-shaped face, snub nose and bow lips, she had black hair and blue eyes and wore large heavy silver American Indian bracelets on each wrist (Daniels 2001: 31).
There are too many accounts of varieties of women warriors—individuals and communities—in ancient and more modern times to deny their existences. See, for example Patricia Albers & Beatrice Medicine, 1983, Stanley B. Alpern 1998, Louise Edwards, 1995, V.I. Guliaev, 2003, Davis-Kimball, 1997, Lyn Webster Wilde, 2000. Such women may have been and are more common than we realize. Here are a few Internet sources.

http://www.lothene.demon.co.uk/others/women.html
http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa032703a.htm
http://www2.wi.net/~maracon/lesson3.html
http://www.discoverychannel.co.uk/history/warrior_women/
http://www.geocities.com/normlaw/wmnarmor.html
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/women_01.shtml
http://www.warriorwomen.org/

The Iliad describes the Amazons (amazoi ‘breastless’) as antianeirai, ‘those who go to war like men.’ Heroditus called them androkttones or ‘killers of men.’ (Leadbetter 1997/2004: 1).

It is very difficult to identify and locate the few women wrote scripts such as Mindy Newell (2/92 #62), and drew (Jill Thompson, 2 issues in late 1988) Wonder Woman. Even in the 1980s only a few women worked and sporadically, for Pérez and Berger. They included Colleen Doran (inker), Nansi Hoolahan (colorist) and Helen Vesik (letterer). It is even harder to track down those involved in the business end: DC President Jenette Kahn in the 1980s, Louise Jones (now Simonson), and Laurie Sutton (Contino, n.d.). The best-selling novelist, Jodi Lynn Picoul, is unique. She was invited to write the DC Comics' Wonder Woman (vol. 3) series after Allan Heinberg left. Her first issue (#6) was released on March 28, 2007. Her last, #10, was released on June 27, 2007 (Wikipedia). Even Karen Berger who began editing Wonder Woman in 1979 and who, unlike her compatriots, remained with DC, and was even promoted in 2006 to Senior Vice President, is given short shrift in the standard Wonder Woman “encyclopedia.” Alice Marble, an associate editor is one of the lucky ones (Daniels 2000: 39). There is a photograph of her in Daniels’ book.

Perhaps because she is a woman? Princess Diana goes one better on her long-lived co-superheroes Batman and Superman. She has three identities!

A wa’f is associated with weddings, the listings of traits, accolades to the beauty of the bride and groom. Wonder Woman is a cartoon. Her corporeal attributes are evident. But like the “Eysheth Ḥayil” they are not commented upon.

William and his first artist/collaborator, Harry Peter, worked together until William died in 1947 of skin cancer. Harry continued to draw Wonder Woman until he died in 1958.

I like to introduce a joke or two into my presentations, so I briefly surfed the Internet initially for jokes about Wonder Woman. The grossly rape-like, sexual nature of most was offensive. Then I googled “it’s a man’s world.” It was broader in scope, but at
base arrogant contempt for women underlay (?) the overwhelming majority. In desperation I googled “jokes by women against men.” In many respects they mirror the “man’s world” with a few key differences. One, the men’s site gave one the feeling that the jokes were beating a dead horse. The women’s site gave one a sense of vigorous challenges to the ubiquitous “might makes right,” the sexual dimorphism that enables men to physically force women to obey them and their laws.

14. This paper was read on Friday 29 April 2008 at The 47th Annual Meeting, Florida Conference of Historians, Superheroes and Comic Books in the United States, Jacksonville, FL, Friday 29 February through Saturday 1 March 2008. Subcategory: "Gender & the Superhero.”

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Jewish women artists.


http://www.timewarner.com/corp/newsroom/pr/0,20812,1215691,00.html

Internet Sources: Warrior Women.

http://www.lothene.demon.co.uk/other/women.html
http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa032703a.htm
http://www2.wi.net/~maracon/lesson3.html
http://www.discoverychannel.co.uk/history/warrior_women/
http://www.geocities.com/normlaw/wmnarmor.html
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/women_01.shtml
http://www.warriorwomen.org/


http://judaism.about.com/od/shabbatpryaersblessings/f/eshetchayil.htm


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