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The Paneled Lives of Extraordinary Women: Comic Books, Superheroines, and American Women in the 1940s

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When scholars examine a society in search of the principles that it holds most dear, popular culture promises an attractive and engaging medium where one can search for answers. Intellectual disciplines such as art history, film studies, and literature demonstrate a constructive merging of critical thinking and entertainment media, whereas other art forms are being mapped out as academic disciplines for the first time. Comic studies, is one of these outcast art forms. Due to comics' unserious nature and association with juvenile literature, the medium is only recently being molded into a coherent academic field, though comics have had a history nearly as long as cinema. Despite the hesitation shown by academics in embracing comics as an independent field, "picture stories" have assisted a range of existing disciplines such as the three listed above, in addition to Gender and Ethnic Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, Philosophy, and History.[1]

It is in the discipline of history that the comic book has yet to reach its fullest potential as a primary source. While some professional work on comic book content has been published, it is largely aimed at fans instead of academics and emphasizes commemoration and imagery over analysis. This approach grossly underserves the latent capacity that comic books have to reveal historical insights into the society that cherished them. Most notably, the superhero genre of comic books serves a role as an ideological mirror and perhaps a shaper of deeply held cultural and moral values.[2]

The addition of the superhero genre to the historical narrative is valuable, particularly as one examines how the ideals of a society change over time. It is with the goal of gaining insight into the new experiences of American women brought about by World War II that I turn to the

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[1] Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *Critical Approaches to Comics: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p.1.
[2] Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, *The Superhero Reader* (Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. xiv.

female superheroine characters born of the Golden Age of Comics, an era in societal flux lasting from 1938-1950. During the wartime Forties, women in factories and women fighting crime both expressed autonomy, agency, and competency while remaining within the bounds of conventional femininity. To what extent were comic books *reflecting* cultural adaptations to American femininity and to what extent could they have been *shaping* its revision? These are the questions that I seek to explore throughout this paper as I construct a narrative around the legacy that Golden Age superheroines left behind.

Understanding the Genre

In 1912, Edgar Rice Burroughs' heroic character Tarzan made his original appearance in a pulp magazine. From there, he was published in a newspaper serialization, then a book, a comic strip, and eventually, a comic book. Tarzan's literary evolution illustrates the emergence of the comic book from a wide variety of published media.[3] Before comic books reached the recognizable 6x9 inch, 4-color form of the Forties, their essence was being shaped by literary forms of previous eras.

The comic book is not the product of one type of preceding media, but rather the result of a wide range of media influences. The earliest form of popular commercial fiction presented in a cheap, serialized, and sensationalized format was the British Victorian penny dreadful. A product of improved printing practices, cheaper paper, improved transport, and rising rates of literacy, the penny dreadful provided working class laborers with written tales of romantic escape from the drudgery of their everyday lives.[4] Toward the beginning of the 20th Century, American publishers mimicked the success of the British serials, creating their own style of inexpensive,

[3] Richard A. Lupoff and Don Thompson, *All in Color for a Dime* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1970), p. 16.
[4] John Springhall, "A Life Story for the People: Edwin J. Brett and the London "Low-Life" Penny Dreadfuls of the 1860s," *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1990): 223-46.

scandalous fiction stories, known as pulp magazines. The pulp papers included series such as *Thrilling Adventures*, *Spicy Adventure Stories*, *Sensation*, and *Adventure*, which contained even more colorful story titles like "The Lake of Flaming Death," "Blood Has Sticky Fingers," and "Rogues' End." Occasionally incorporating artwork into their pages, pulp magazines mainly attracted readers with lurid tales occasionally written by respected authors such as Edgar Rice Burroughs, H.P Lovecraft, and H.G. Wells.[5] Publishers eventually created hero-centered pulps that spotlighted mythically talented hero characters like Doc Savage and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. These magazines became the forerunners of later superheroes as comic books adopted artwork. Comic books evolved from written narratives limited to printed word and sparsely illustrated pages to visual narratives told completely via image supported by a minimal amount of text.[6]

Despite being the offspring of a literature with proven popularity, the genesis of the hero comic book was not truly established until it was powered by the advent of the first superhero icon. Though a handful of comic book scholars protest otherwise, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman is widely regarded by the majority of academics as the first established superhero comic book character. Making his first appearance on American newsstands in June 1938 on the cover of *Action Comics 1*, the Man of Steel personified a new type of genre characterized by colored costumes, superhuman abilities, and a deep-seated drive to protect the innocent and obtain justice.[7] Though the character took several months to achieve success, the franchise soon

[5] Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Ashland, Or.: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), p. 32.
[6] Mike Madrid, *Divas, Dames, and Daredevils* (Colestin, Or.: Exterminating Angel Press, 2013), p.14.
[7] Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: a Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 14.

capitalized on a market of readers hungry to consume the adventures of the superhero and doubled *Action Comics* circulation.[8] Soon other superpowered imitations began to follow.

Once other comic book publishers caught wind of the lucrative popularity of superpowered, crime-fighting characters, they scrambled to include superheroes among their own publishing line. Already by 1940, 80% of the 109 comic book titles published in the United States featured superheroes.[9] According to comic book historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet, when the comic book industry came of age in 1939, there were only 22 new superhero comic releases, but that number increased dramatically as the genre took off (see Table 1 below).[10]

Table 1: Proliferation of New Superhero Comics from 1939-1945[11]

Year	Number of new superhero comic releases in that year
1939	22
1940	697
1941	832
1942	934
1943	1051
1944-45	1125

One contemporary scholar commented on the phenomenal growth of "Superman and the whole breed of machine-men" saying, "every week, every day a new one is hatched, bigger, better, and more wondrous yet."[12] New volumes with sensational titles like *Human Torch, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman,* and *Captain Marvel* appeared on newsstands. Fifties

[8] Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1947), p. 343.
[9] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Bart Beaty, and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men: a Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), p. 20.
[10] Ibid., p. 22.
[11] Ibid.
[12] James Frank Vlamos, "The Sad Case of the Funnies" *The American* Mercury, (April 1941): p. 411-415.

comic critic, Coulton Waugh, blamed the growth of the superhero genre for putting to rest youth magazines such as *St. Nicholas, the Youth's Companion*, and *The American Boy.* These periodicals had dominated the market of children's literature until they went out of business within a few years of the genesis of the superhero.[13]

Besides being created for the purpose of making a lot of money for their publishers, these characters shared many traits in common that came to define the superhero archetype. First of all, every superhero character demonstrated strength of character that reflected some system of positive values.[14] Furthermore, the hero determines that he or she will protect those values at any cost. Contemporary comic book scholar, Danny Fingeroth, asserts that because of this trait "the superhero, more than the ordinary fictional hero, has to represent the values of the society that produces him."[15]

Second, whether obtained through supernatural origins, a scientific experiment, or specialized training, superheroes must possess certain skills that exceed the abilities of normal humans.[16] These powers are what allows them to rise above the common rank and file and assess accurately who the guilty party is and how much force is needed to subdue them. Generally these powers also allow the hero to avoid dying in the process.

The third, and typically final, trait ascribed to the superhero is the secret identity. Because of some personal motive, often to protect loved ones from harm, the superhero character fights injustice as their costumed persona and lives out their regular life as a common citizen of a different persona. The concept of a person possessing dual identities, one concealed and one exposed, is heavily freighted with meaning. For one, the secret identity strongly connects to the

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[13] Waugh, *The Comics*, p. 344.
[14] Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 17.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

urban life experience. Superheroes reflect the physical and social mobility that evolved in cities by the early 19th Century as urban centers offered opportunity and anonymity to American immigrants seeking the American Dream.[17] Secret identities also connect the reader to the character. The averageness of the hero appeals to the reader who similarly thinks, "Don't underestimate me. I may not be who you think I am."[18] Perhaps the hero must pay a cost for possessing their great power by having a secret identity. By observing the taboo of secrecy, they are like traditional warriors who "pay" for their great strength in battle by abstaining from food, sleep, or sex.[19]

The Artists Behind the Wonder Women

Who defined the boundaries of the superhero archetype? Before the war as the first comic books were being published, the majority of creators were liberal, Jewish males who came from lower-middle class or working class backgrounds.[20] Men like Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, Bob Kane, Jerry Siegel, and Joe Shuster represented the majority of writers and artists who used comic books to voice their concerns over the rising threat of Nazism in Europe. With the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' entrance into war, these men were drafted into the armed forces, temporarily leaving one of America's hottest new publishing industries in short supply of experienced creative talent.

Because of the growing demand for artists and writers, minority groups were granted work opportunities in the creative process that had been closed to them before the war. The result was a diverse cast of comic book creators. Women interested in comic book work especially benefitted, and in 1942, the number of women working in the comic book industry tripled from

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[17] Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester, *The Superhero Reader*, p. 187.
[18] Fingeroth, *Superman on the* Couch, p. 60.
[19] Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester, *The Superhero Reader*, p. 105.
[20] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, p. 161.

the previous year.[21] Female artists like Jill Elgin, Barbara Hall, Ruth Roche, and Tarpe Mills worked on superheroines like War Nurse and the Girl Commandos, Phantom Lady, and Miss Fury. Matt Baker, regarded as the first African American artist in the comic book field, made his entrance into the industry during the war years, creating a character that was appealing to both men and women.

The man behind America's most iconic and enduring superheroine similarly came from a background unassociated with comics. William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, was a psychologist who came from a prestigious academic background. Known for inventing the polygraph lie detector test, Marston also developed an interest in the psychology of comics. After studying the comics and the genre of superhero lore in particular, the scholar concluded that the "picture-story" could be a constructive tool for teaching children strong moral values "worth many times its weight in pulp paper and multicolored ink."[22] The lesson that Marston wanted to get across to America's youth was one of female empowerment: the belief that women were "less susceptible than men to aggression and acquisitiveness" and could bring global peace through love.[23] For Marston, the problem was that "not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power."[24] To overcome this obstacle, America needed " a feminine character with all the strength of a Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman."[25] Thus, Wonder Woman was born by Marston's efforts to expose American youth to a the power of a positive female role model. However, did his message reach its intended audience?

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[21] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: the Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 33.
[22] William Moulton Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," *The American Scholar* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1943-44), p. 35-44.
[23] Les Daniels and Chip Kidd, *Wonder Woman: the Life and Times of the Amazon* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), p. 19.
[24] Marston, Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics, p. 42.
[25] Ibid.

Who Was Reading Comic Books?

Due in large part to the defense industry jumpstarting the U.S. economy following the Great Depression, comic books became one type of a variety of entertainment goods consumed on a massive scale by Americans both at home and abroad. As more and more American workers began to earn disposable income, the medium met their growing demand for inexpensive and portable literature that entertained all ages. In 1943, sales increased from the previous year's 15 million comics books sold a month to 25 million according to *Publisher's Weekly*.[26] *Newsweek* attributed the majority of the growing sales in this market to the nation's schoolchildren and American servicemen.[27]

Juvenile readers have faithfully represented a robust portion of comic book readership since the medium's arrival, a fact of which publishers were more than well aware. Integrating humor and youngster characters into their publications, the comic book industry worked persistently to cater to their target audience. From 1940 to 1942, 75% of comic book revenue came from purchases made by children.[28] America's youth voraciously read what they purchased: by the mid Forties, more than 90% of children aged 6 to 11 read an average of fifteen comic books a month while roughly 80% of adolescents Ages 12-18 read twelve comic books a month.[29] Between ages 6-16, female readership trailed male readership by only 4-6%, revealing a representative female interest in comics.[30] Furthermore, in accounting for the number of adolescents who read comic books "only occasionally," the final number of readers increases by

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[26] Wright, Comic Book Nation, p. 31.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ian Gordon, "The Comics: Comics as an Independent Commodity, 1939-1945," in *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), p. 132.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid. p. 139.

roughly 10%.[31] Statistics such as these reveal a strong connection between America's youth and comic book consumption.

Adults were uncertain in how to respond to youths' steady diet of comic books. Several innovative educators attempted to tap children's natural interest in the genre by integrating comic books or their characters into education. For example, an English teacher from a Massachusetts high school, with the assistance of D. C. Comics, prepared a language workbook starring Superman that led to his students completing a week's worth of work in a single evening.[32] One publisher, began a comic line titled *True Comics* that sought to teach young Americans about real historical figures like FDR; however, it failed to capture the interest of children who found the comics "too much like history" and "uninteresting."[33]

In contrast, other Americans had little faith in the educational capabilities of comics and questioned their "undemocratic ideology." Walter Ong, an American Jesuit philosopher and prominent Catholic intellectual, heavily criticized superhero comic books in his 1945 essay "The Comics and the Superstate" arguing that such characters glorified Fascism to children via "the blind hero-worship motif developed by Hitler and Mussolini."[34] Other researchers agreed with claims that superheroes bore too great of similarity to the Nazi ideology of *Übermensch*. One article stated outright that such characters made comic strips "Hitleresque."[35] Criticism of comics' ideological and moral content proliferated in the post-war period, reaching its ultimate culmination through Dr. Fredric Wertham's publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, which instigated a congressional investigation of the comic publication industry.

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[31] Waugh, The Comics, p. 334.
[32] W.W.D. Sones, "The Comics and the Instructional Method," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 18, no. 4, (Dec., 1944), p. 233.
[33] Ruth Strang, "Why Children Read the Comics," *The Elementary School Journal* 43, no. 6, (Feb., 1943), p. 338.
[34] Walter Ong, "The Comics and the Super State: Glimpses Down the Back Alleys of the Mind," *Arizona Quarterly* 1, no. 3, (Autumn, 1945), p. 38.
[35] Vlamos, "The Sad Case of the Funnies," p. 411.

Besides children and teenagers on the home front, American GIs were the second largest consumer group of comic books. Reading for pleasure was ranked high among off-duty soldiers' recreational options and was considered an educational and entertaining morale-boosting activity; however, the Army Library Service (ALS) had fallen into a state of disrepair since the previous war and supplies were insufficient to meet the current demand.[36] Consequently, when reading material was desperately sought after by servicemen, comic books did their part to help out the war effort and in fact soon surpassed similar print mediums. Waugh writes, "at post exchanges, the combined sales of *Life, Reader's Digest*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* were exceeded by comic books by a ratio of ten to one."[37] Soon, one in every four magazines shipped to troops overseas was a comic book, and 35, 000 copies of Superman alone went to servicemen each month.[38]

What made comic books so popular among GIs? For one, they were lightweight, inexpensive, and easily transportable for soldiers on the go. Hardbound books were inflexible, pricier, and difficult to carry, making them less appealing to servicemen in need of equally transitory reading material.[39] Action type comic books, such as found in the superhero genre, also attracted army readers. The fictional adventures of inspirational characters offered soldiers an escape from the utter monotony of rigid military life while also providing them with a mythological context that related to their own journeys as war heroes fighting against injustice.[40] Not all Americans perceived comics as beneficial to its servicemen however. Letters written to the New York Times complained that furnishing soldiers with cheap, juvenile literature was "no

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[36] Christopher P. Loss, "Reading between Enemy Lines: Armed Services Editions and World War II," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 3, (Jul., 2003), p. 823.
[37] Waugh, *The Comics*, p. 334.
[38] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 31.
[39] Loss, "Reading between Enemy Lines," p. 812.
[40] Ibid., p. 823.

way to produce an intelligent military."[41] Despite such opinions, comic books remained popular with U.S. soldiers throughout the duration of the war.

The influence of comic books spread beyond the limit of its sales. Similar to magazines, comic books possess the unique characteristic of "pass-along readership" or the circulation of a print source that occurs after the initial purchase. A child might pay for a comic at a newsstand, but later trade it to a friend after they've finished it, increasing the issues' total readership. Additionally, adults contributed to pass-along readership by reading comics via an opportunistic manner that resulted from their proximity to children.[42] In the Forties, most comic books had a pass-along value of an average five readers per issue.[43] Whether through pass-along circulation or regular readership, comics were exposed to a wide range of the population, successfully penetrating American culture.

Characters as Caricatures

Contrary to the common perception, Wonder Woman, arguably the most popular and enduring superheroine character today, was not the sole superheroine to emerge in the 1940s nor did her creation mark the genesis of the first female character in vacuum devoid of feminine heroes. There existed in comic book literature a variety of female roles ranging from headlining leading ladies such as Phantom Lady, to comic anthology characters like Madame Strange, to popular supporting or spin-off roles such as Mary Marvel. These crime-fighting women reflected a significant blend of transition within tradition, a mirror of the new experiences that American women encountered as a result of the war.

Nearly all action heroines created during the Golden Era were white women. Black, Hispanic, and other minority groups of women were most often either overlooked completely as

[41] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 31.
[42] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, p. 200.
[43] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, p. 31.

candidates for action roles or caricaturized as a racial stereotype. One exception of a recurring female action character of color can be found in Speed Comics' 1942 series *Pat Parker, War Nurse and the Girl Commandos*. The titular character Pat Parker is a war nurse and costumed heroine who forms the first all-female team in comic books.[44] The group includes Mei Ling, a Chinese woman who desires revenge against the Japanese for killing her family. Though her dialogue reflects an American stereotype of the "Asiatic" dialect, Mei Ling is generally depicted in a realistic way that avoids overt racism. This serves as a contrast to the Japanese characters of the same comic who are portrayed as vamp-like figures with elongated teeth, slanted eyes, and poor eyesight (see images below). This discriminatory representation hints at the anti-Japanese sentiment that existed in wartime America. Following the attack at Pearl Harbor, it suddenly became significant that white Americans be able to distinguish between Japanese enemies and Chinese allies. *Life* magazine responded to this issue, publishing an article at the outbreak of the war that explained how the average person could visibly tell the difference between a Japanese person and a Chinese person through observing their "anthropometric conformations."[45]

Figure 1 (left): Mei Ling, a Chinese woman, is depicted as nearly white excepting her dialogue[46]

Figure 2 (right): Racist depictions of Japanese soldiers from Girl Commandos[47]

[44] Madrid, *Divas, Dames, and Daredevils*, p. 23.
[45] "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese," *Life*, (Dec., 1941): p. 81.
[46] "The Girl Commandos," *Speed Comics* 1, no. 23, (Oct., 1942).

Differences in social standing were often more observable in the tales of comic book heroines. From orphans to heiresses, Forties comics were filled with characters gravitating toward polarizing ends of the economic spectrum. Characters who were members of the social elite offered readers a fictional escape into the lives of the wealthy, whereas working class type heroines related to the reader's everyday problems, playing upon empathy.[48] While there are examples of wage-earning women and debutantes scattered throughout the decade, heroines with an upper class background tended to be more popular in the early Forties whereas heroines with a working class background held greater influence in the Post-War era.[49]

Superheroines with upper class alter egos tended to use their secret lives as crime-fighters as an escape from the boredom of their tedious, privileged lives. These characters were often the daughters of wealthy, affluent families likely to be found in the local social register. High society superheroines such as Miss Fury, Phantom Lady, and Lady Luck occupied their free time as ladies of repute with fashion, social engagements, and charity work but were always ready for, if not craving, more action. In fact, when the day had been saved, and the adventure was at its end, many superheroines expressed dissatisfaction upon returning to their dull lives of leisure. In one example, Sandra Knight, a senator's daughter who fights crime as Phantom Lady, wakes up one late morning and "hopes something happens for a change [because] I haven't put Phantom Lady to work for weeks!"[50] Superhero society girls, like Phantom Lady, got their thrills by escaping the private sphere and living a double life filled with danger, excitement, and moral autonomy.[51]

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Madrid, *The Supergirls,* p. 6, 25.
[49] Ibid., p. 6.
[50] *Phantom Lady* no. 13, Fox Feature Syndicate, (August, 1947): p. 5.
[51] Madrid, *The Supergirls,* p. 7.

Not unlike these fictional comic book socialites, some American women looked for a deeper calling outside of their assigned roles in society. The war provided an obvious outlet for such sentiments. For example, Actress Katherine Hepburn, famous for her numerous film roles as eccentric heiresses, voiced her dissatisfaction about being a woman unable to serve a more dynamic role in the war. According to her correspondence with her college friend and active serviceman, Robert McKnight, Hepburn contrasted her life with McKnight's military service as "some mad dream" and in going through the motions of her daily routine, she felt "as though she had been left behind on another planet."[52] In a later letter to McKnight, she expressed her belief that it was good to be "a vital part of the most active world –however horrible –to feel that you are really functioning to the best of your capabilities. So in a way, I envy you."[53] Many other women expressed a desire revealed by the war to "be men," because as one magazine interview explained, "during wartime, girls are doing the best they can, but they are just second. Second to men."[54]

On the other side of the comic book coin, working class superheroines lived their lives as career women with a little less glamour and a little more grit. Wage-earning characters such as Madame Strange, Black Canary, the Woman in Red, and War Nurse made their living by holding steady day jobs as reporters, shopkeepers, nurses, secretaries, detectives, etc. For these characters, the decision to moonlight as crime fighters was less motivated by thrill-seeking than the high society heroines popular at the forefront of the Forties. [55] The "common woman" heroine was more interested in protecting a personal stake that she held in enforcing justice, whether that stake was protecting the innocent (particularly love interests ignorant of her heroic

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[52] Katherine Hepburn, *Letters to Robert McKnight*, 1943, from Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 101.
[53] Ibid., p. 102.
[54] "Tyrone Powers," *Motion Picture Magazine* (June 1943), from Yellin, Our Mother's War, p. 102.
[55] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, p. 23.

identity), exacting personal revenge, or simply doing her duty. Dinah Drake was a levelheaded florist with a dry sense of humor who changed into the dynamic and sexually expressive Black Canary whenever her love interest, detective Larry Lance, was likely to find himself in danger. As is common with many other superheroes, the irony is that Lance, the object of Drake's affections, is so smitten by the vibrant persona of Black Canary, he fails to see that the woman of his dreams is standing right in front of him.[56]

Figure 3 (above): Dinah hiding her secret identity in plain sight from her love interest, Lance[57]

Outside of the fictional world, American women were also motivated to step outside of their normal sphere in order to protect men overseas. War posters persuaded women to take up war jobs or join the military corps in order to "bring him home sooner."[58] Guilt was a powerful tool utilized frequently by propaganda makers. Posters with warnings like a "soldier may die unless you man this machine," threatened women with the death of a soldier if they failed to do their part for the campaign for victory.[59] Women were also barraged with the importance of preserving morale. One magazine articles advised soldier's wives the most important thing they

[56] Madrid, *The Supergirls*, p. 25.
[57] *Flash Comics* no. 92, (February, 1948), p. 7.
[58] John Philip Falter, "Bring Him Home Sooner--Join the Waves," 1944.
[59] Gail Collins, *America's Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: William Morrow, 2003), p. 371.

could do to aid the war effort was "don't mope [because] standing up to heartache and loneliness is your contribution to righting a topsy-turvy world."[60] War posters implied that "longing won't bring him back sooner" but working a war job might. The pressure applied by propaganda efforts held women responsible for the war in a way that mobilized them to action. However, as more and more women entered into the public roles of war jobs, they found for themselves enmeshed in a battleground of their own.

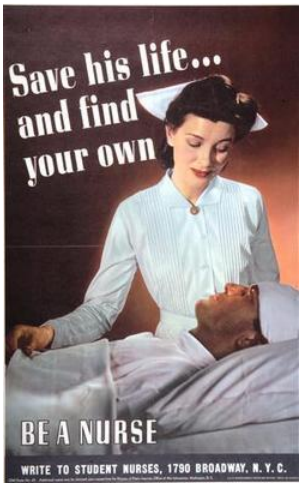

Figure 4 (left): This American recruitment poster calls upon women to discover their calling as war nurses [61]

Figure 5 (right): Women were encouraged to keep up morale and take on a war job in this poster[62]

Women and the Internal War

Wartime opportunities for women created a paradoxical environment where women were both praised for their ability to perform public work competently but also relegated to a domestic sphere where it was believed their "natural" strengths and limitations placed them.[63] The struggle that existed among women who attempted to reconcile these competing social roles fueled an implicit war on the home front —a confrontation over the identity of the ideal woman.

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[60] Patnacia Davidson Guinan, "Back Home to Mother," *House Beautiful* (August, 1943), p. 17.
[61] Office of War Information, "Be a Nurse, Save His Life and Find Your Own," 1943.
[62] Lawrence Wilbur, "Longing Won't Bring Him Back Sooner…Get a War Job!" 1944.
[63] Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p. 1.

Components of female identity—beauty, relationships, influence—all came to be shaped by the changes instigated by the war effort. According to historian Susan M. Hartmann, media images of women expanded, "widening the range of acceptable human behavior, providing positive examples of unconventional women, and blurring traditional gender distinctions; yet, even these new models were rooted in a context which sustained the centrality of women's domestic lives and their relationships with men."[64] Popular culture, including comic book heroines, articulated and approved of women's new experiences while also cautiously respecting conventional womanhood.

During the early 1940's, a woman's ability to embody the ideals of a certain configuration of feminine beauty largely defined her value.[65] A woman visibly expressed the "right" traits of womanhood through the length of her hair, her wardrobe of dresses, skirts, and high heels, and the makeup that she wore. When the war broke out, companies began to market female beauty as a vital point of morale through the use of slogans like "Beauty is her badge of courage."[66] Women bought into the importance of keeping up a fashionable female appearance, bringing it with them into the work place when defense jobs became available. Unfortunately, where feminine fashion trends met heavy industry, on-site accidents tended to happen. One 1941 report found that nine percent of injuries in shipyards occurred as a direct consequence of failure to wear safe attire such as proper clothing, hair coverings, and safety shoes.[67] Adapting to the need for practical clothing in the work place, many women adopted a less conventional appearance, wearing slacks, flat shoes, and shorter hairstyles. Some even began to prefer the

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[64] Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 189.
[65] Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 26.
[66] Robert R. Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On?: The American Home Front, 1941-1945* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), p. 123.
[67] Dorothy K. Newman, "Employing Women in Shipyards," *Bulletin of the Women's Bureau* no. 192-6, United States Department of Labor, p. 70.

comfort of the new wardrobe. One aircraft worker claimed, "I just about gave up dresses during the war."[68]

In giving up the tangible markings of traditional femininity, many women did not realize that they were also compromising a special deference shown toward the fairer sex. By filling men's roles in industrial jobs, it was particularly middle class women who lost their status as protected homebodies and became categorized with women expected to fend for themselves.[69] For one female defense worker it was when men no longer offered her their seat on the bus, store clerks snubbed her, and men leered at her on the street, that she realized "being a lady depended more upon our clothes than upon ourselves."[70] Now that class distinctions of womanhood had been diminished, American women were forced to reexamine what the ideal embodiment of feminine beauty should look like.

Comic books reflected a similar struggle in answering to what extent beauty should come to define a female character. The vast majority of women characters in comic books were young, fair, and attractive, and especially headlining heroines were drawn up as creamy white nymphs without physical flaws. Known as "Good Girl Art," this popular Forties comic art style is defined by its depiction of women as young, sexy, and often skimpily dressed figures designed to attract the eyes of male viewers through sex appeal.[71] The creator of headlining heroine Phantom Lady and one of the first African American contributors in the industry, Matt Baker intentionally

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[68] Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise, *A Mouthful of Rivets: Women at Work in World War II* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), p. 54.
[69] Collins, *America's Women*, p. 385.
[70] Constance Reid, *Slacks and Calluses: Our Summer in a Bomber Factory*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), p. 69.
[71] Richard A. Lupoff, *The Great American Paperback: An Illustrated Tribute to Legends of the Book* (New York: Collectors Press, 2001).

modeled his leading lady after pin-up girl posters.[72] This tactic was employed by other comic book artists in order to attract the eye of new readers –both male and female.

A handful of female characters happened to stray from the pin-up "good girl" archetype, and one in particular challenged the idea that a woman's value is derived by one type of looks. Etta Candy, the faithful sidekick of Wonder Woman, was an overweight sorority girl, who put a stop to her former anorexic condition by consuming sweets at every opportunity. This colorful character provided comedic relief as well as displaying impressive resourcefulness, dependability, and loyalty to Wonder Woman. Saving her Amazon friend on numerous occasions, Etta proved time and again to be a formidable force for good; however, unlike overtly sexualized comic book heroines, this plump sidekick defies the stereotype that female morality is influenced by uniform beauty, rigid bodily discipline, and self-denial.[73] In fact, in one issue when Wonder Woman's alter ego warns Etta that "if she gets too fat, she won't catch a man," Etta goes so far as to suggest that a boyfriend is less valuable than candy because "there's nothing you can do with him, but candy you can eat!"[74]

Figure 6 (above): Etta Candy saves the day with the help of her sorority sisters[75]

[72] Trina Robbins, *The Great Women Superheroes* (Northampton, Mass.: Kitchen Sink Press, 1996), p. 72.
[73] Lillian Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 44.
[74] Sensation Comics no. 12, (Dec., 1942), from William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, *Wonder Woman archives*. (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1998), p. 239.
[75] Sensation Comics no. 12, (Dec., 1942), from Marston and Peter, *Wonder Woman archives*, p. 239.

Etta Candy's outlook on dating certainly did not reflect the status quo of the era. Most women considered their looks as the determining factor of whether or not men found them attractive enough to date and potentially marry. As depicted by the 1927 silent film *It*, the American female dream was to attract a man, get married, and never work again.[76] Young adults in high school and college in particular were the targets of a barrage of media advertising gimmicky products guaranteed to help a girl get a man. Numerous promotions in teen girl magazine, *Calling All Girls*, expressed the belief that every girl needs or wants a boyfriend. Advertisements with claims like "Boys like a good dancer," "the girl with the good skin gets the dates," and "*He* likes lovely hair, keep it lovely for *Him,"* were unavoidable and found in a large volume of published periodical material marketed toward women.[77] Such statements both reflected and shaped a societal belief that a woman could only achieve her fullest potential as a female when she had obtained a boyfriend, and eventually, a husband.

The connection that was made between a woman's value and her role as wife and mother is rooted partly in the backlash against the New Woman of the Roaring Twenties. In response to this "new world feminism," writers such as Harriet Abbott decried women who "smothered their womanhood" by "refusing to have children," "placing their household in the care of servants" and "selfishly satisfying her personal ambitions."[78] When the Great Depression struck, a social taboo arose around the idea of women who held jobs that belonged to breadwinning men. Women instead, were depicted as the strong anchor of the household to be found in the kitchen, "a corner of reality in a world gone berserk."[79]At the end of the Thirties, unemployment rates remained high enough to discourage many married women from entering the workforce.

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[76] Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women*, p. 4.
[77] *Calling All Girls* no. 31, (July, 1944).
[78] Harriet Abbott, "What the Newest New Woman Is," *Ladies Home Journal*, (August, 1920), p. 154.
[79] Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), p. 5.

Fictional career girls depicted in magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* and *True Story* often suffered in their success, demonstrating how dissatisfaction and unhappiness resulted when women left their domestic role.[80]

Women confined to the domestic sphere adopted an increased public role during the war period as the need for workers in the labor force increased. Through the work provided by defense industry jobs and the creation of female military corps, women were able to step into the sphere of men and, due to the war exceeding its expected length, stay there for an extended period. In this climate, women were expressing an agency that had been much more discrete before WWII. However, the literature and propaganda that encouraged women to seize these new opportunities still attempted to craft a public perception of American women that supported the values of a virtuous traditional ideology. The defense industry "propagated an image of the American woman as wife and mother," while the WAC countered claims of its existence as "camp-followers" and "mannish women" by characterizing female soldiers as "chaste and asexual."[81] With new experiences meeting traditional expectations, women formed a broadened understanding of their female identity.

Comic book heroines speak articulately into the pressures that surfaced as American women wrestled with the concept of feminine autonomy and influence. In popular media of previous decades, female characters who exercised any true, significant power were depicted as innately evil or corrupted by the power.[82] Women in society who exhibited autonomy, particularly in their sexual expression, were characterized as predators, either lesbians or femme

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[80] Ibid., p. 6.
[81] Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*: *German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 52;
Leisa D. Meyer, "Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women's Army Corps during World War II," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3, (Autumn, 1992), p. 581.
[82] Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, p. 80.

fatales. Exemplified by females ranging from the fictional "vamp" characters of Theda Bara to the real-life seductress and spy, Mata Hari, women with influence were strongly associated with death, danger, and deception. Defining these cultural figures as "female tricksters," scholar Lori Landay attributes this perception to the idea that femininity and autonomy were paradoxical. "Female trickery," as described by Landay, "highlights the issue of women's exercise of covert power."[83] Women characters must navigate their feminine identity and their wish to be autonomous through the use of covert power such as deception and manipulation to fulfill both of these desires.

Many villainesses in comic books identify strongly with the female trickster trope. A great number of storylines featured conniving villainesses, often a Nazi spy or sympathizer, who used underhanded tactics to ensnare the protagonist. In action comics where the main character was a woman, these deceitful femme fatales served as foils in contrast to the candor and self-control of the virtuous heroine. For example, the central antagonist to superheroine Miss Fury is the beautiful Nazi Baroness, Erica von Kampf. Portrayed as cold and calculating, the Baroness acts through deception, discretely murdering an unconscious man via gas oven poisoning and successfully seducing the love interest of main character Marla Drake. Von Kampf is further contrasted to the compassionate and sympathizing Marla when she violently shakes a little boy. Marla, as her alter ego Miss Fury, later rescues this boy from a mad scientist's experiment and adopts him. The Baroness, as a villainous female trickster, illustrates how a powerful deceptive woman commits evil, while Marla Drake represents the counter notion that a woman's true power is seen in her ability to embrace her role as tender caregiver and mother.

[83] Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women*, p. 29.

Figure 7 (left): The Baroness is portrayed as cruel, abusive, and anti-motherly[84]

Figure 8 (right): Marla Drake, as depicted here, is motherly and compassionate[85]

Superheroines occasionally complicated the picture of ideal female power and self-control. Most female heroines reinforced the belief that a woman's power must be contained and exercised covertly by separating their hero work from their everyday lives via the secret identity.[86] Unlike these figures, Madame Strange, a superheroine described as "mysterious, beautiful, and cloaked with an unknown identity" provides an illustration of a powerful woman with no ties to a domestic role.[87] Madame Strange, unlike Landay's female trickster, openly demonstrates her physicality and hard-edged stance against evil as her crime-fighting strategies prove to be uncharacteristically macho for a leading lady. In a single story plot, Madame Strange menacingly threatens violence, hurls lethal knives at thugs, runs down thugs with a car, aggressively throws an attacker through a wall, and flings grenades at the villain.[88] Clearly a breed apart from the average domestic, Strange does not repress her physicality. Yet unlike the majority of other female tricksters, her power represents only a threat *to* evil, not *of* evil.

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[84] Tarpé Mills, Trina Robbins, and Lorraine Turner, *Miss Fury: Sensational Sundays 1944-1949* (San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2011).
[85] Ibid.
[86] Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women*, p. 148.
[87] "Madame Strange," *Great Comics*, (Nov. 1941).
[88] Ibid.

Interestingly, the Madam Strange series was dropped after three issues; perhaps, this was the consequence of featuring a somewhat alien female character.

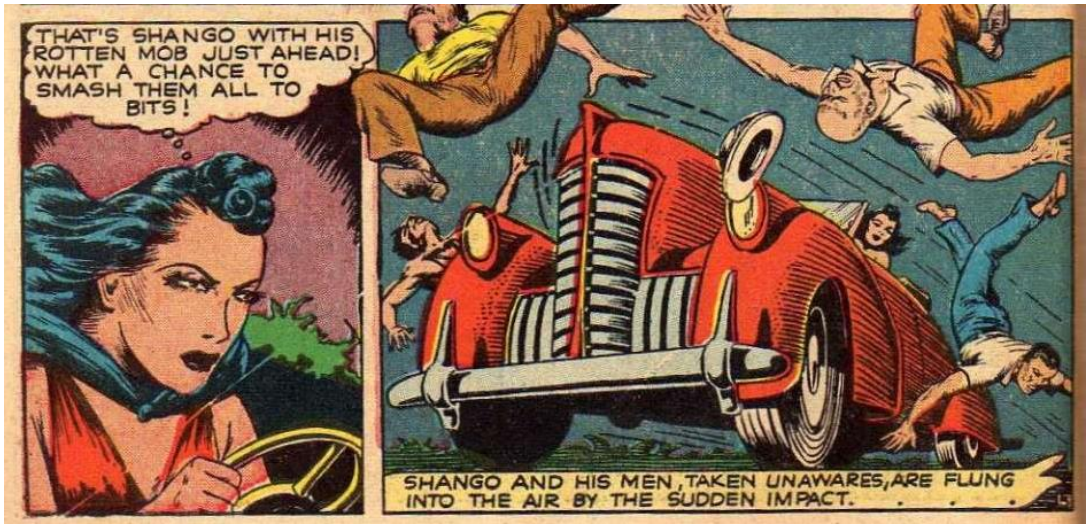

Figure 9 (above): Madame Strange is powerfully dangerous[89]

As American women explored the power of their capability on the job or in the service during wartime, they also came to reexamine the social role of the female. Before the war, a woman's sphere was defined by the cultural limits of "domesticity, sentimentalism, repression of the body, and suppression of the mind."[90] As the United States entered the conflict, its female citizens were called upon to act against this gendered norm, creating anxiety for many onlookers. Two questions arose almost immediately as women joined the male work force in increasing numbers: "Will all these women go back to their homes at the conclusion of the war?" and "Will they ever be content with their homes again?"[91] Such fears were allayed by a common belief that women prioritized the family above all else, or as articulated by one woman "the work is wonderful, but the home comes first."[92] Put another way, the entrance of women into the public sphere would ultimately be only a temporary transition in American society.

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[89] Ibid.
[90] Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women*, p. 26.
[91] Margaret Culkin Banning, "Will They Go Back Home?" *The Rotarian* (Sept. 1943), p. 28.
[92] Ibid., p. 30.

The growing national concern about the crossing-over of gender boundaries made its way into comic books as a number of superheroines wrestled with the consequences of living a double life. Just like the literary female tricksters who experienced fragmentation of the self by ignoring the boundaries of male and female spheres, superheroines lived duplicitous lives torn between their private and public selves.[93] The most iconic and enduring superheroine of the era, Wonder Woman, experienced many of the challenges that resulted from maintaining a dual identity. In her origin story, Wonder Woman leaves her idyllic island home of Amazons behind to help defend "America, the last citadel of democracy and equal rights for women."[94] When Wonder Woman arrives in America, she adopts a civilian identity known as Diana Prince.

If Wonder Woman was the character's "true self," why did she need to adopt a secret identity? Perhaps, in order to participate as a woman in American society, she needed to pretend to be less powerful and independent than she really was.[95] In addition, maintaining dual personas demands a price of admission. Wonder Woman creates for herself "a fractured sense of self sustained by the duplicitous social practices necessary to negotiate the maintenance of submissive femininity while participating in the public sphere of wartime society."[96] In order for Wonder Woman to successfully exist in the public sphere of autonomy and the private sphere of femininity, she protects her identities through some measure of deceit. These identities at times compete for her priorities, forcing her to make the decision about which self is her "true and best" self.

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[93] Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women*, p. 26.
[94] Wonder Woman archives p. 15
[95] Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-women*, p. 148.
[96] Ibid., p. 149.

Figure 10 (above): Wonder Woman's two personas compete with each other[97]

"To Be Continued?"—The End of an Era

At the end of the war, time continued to march on, leaving the new questions and experiences of women in an unresolved state of ambiguity as men re-entered the work force and women returned to the home. The future of the superhero comic book looked just as uncertain. With a sudden drop in military demand for reading material, in addition to the loss of wartime foes to serve as superheroes' primary antagonists, publishers prepared for the worst. Surprisingly, the industry experienced no significant losses, expanding in circulation due to its price stability and new customers brought in by the baby boom.[98] With the dawn of the Cold War however, new fears spread across the nation concerning America's moral fiber.

Comic books were called into question regarding their morality and blamed for rising rates of juvenile delinquency. Leading the charge against them was Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German-born psychiatrist who published a book in 1954 that denigrated the industry, *Seduction of the Innocent*. In its pages, superheroes like Batman and Robin and Wonder Woman were labeled as

[97] *Sensation Comics* from Marston and Peter, *Wonder Woman archives*.
[98] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, p. 30.

"violent" and "homoerotic."[99] The United States Senate opened a subcommittee hearing on juvenile delinquency that focused on the dangers of such material. Before it was revealed half a century later that Wertham had "manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated his evidence," the comic book industry had received its black eye.[100] It would take several years of adaptation to the need for moral regulation before superhero comics regained a measure their former popularity.

With the impressive influence it held at the beginning of the Forties, the comic book industry was in a position to convey significant messages through the cultural icons it created. Whereas some messages were constructed with intention and purpose as in the case of Wonder Woman, others like Phantom Lady implicitly arose from the desire to create picture stories that were both titillating and relevant. Whether by coincidence or by design, these superheroines played a part in establishing a precedent of the superhero as a cultural metaphor—representative of the societies they live in. These idiosyncratic role models from the Golden Age lived on in the consciousness of their readers. In 1972, when feminist Gloria Steinem and her team of editors prepared the first full issue of *Ms*. magazine for print, the group chose to feature Wonder Woman on the cover—an illustration of how "you can't have democracy without feminism."[101] Perhaps, it is in these later generations of Americans that the legacy of the American superheroine can be seen, working alongside the influence of their mothers—the women who realized what they were capable of during the war and quietly returned to the home at its end, passing on the message to their children that a woman can be anyone she wants to be.

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[99] Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954), p. 191.
[100] Carol Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4, (2012). p. 386.
[101] *Wonder Women! The Untold History of American Superheroines*. Directed by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan. 2013.

Figure 11 (above): A mother reads a comic book to her daughters[102]

[102] Sam Shere, "A Mother Reads Her Children the Comics While Traveling on the "El Capitan" Train Between Chicago and Los Angeles," *Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images*, 1945.

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