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"Suffering Sappho!": Wonder Woman and the Reinvention of the Feminine Ideal

Long before *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, Dr. William Moulton Marston envisioned a four-color feminized paradise; guided by Aphrodite, Amazons would send a representative to "Man's World" to teach men peace, rule them with love, and enforce their principles with violence. It was December, 1941, and Dr. Marston - the psychologist who invented the lie detector - created Wonder Woman.

As socio-cultural barometers, comic books reached an apex from the late 1930s through 1945. This "Golden Age" gave birth to a pantheon of super-heroes in a medium that was enjoying its widest popularity among every demographic. Diana Prince's adventures reflect both the drastic readership changes in that medium, as well as a modern patriarchal society's attitude toward women, history, and the classical tradition. In creating the first modern "warrior princess", Marston renegotiated, reinvented and redefined femininity, male-female relationships, and the popular conceptions of Greek Gods and Amazons for millions of people who have never read Homer.

In the cartoon crucible of the early '40s, Wonder Woman's classical background both legitimized and mystified her. At once archaic Amazon and contemporary Rosie the Riveter, both the context and form of her ancient roots endowed her with a sense of danger, unpredictability and otherness - one shared, at first, by her ultra-modern, science-fiction compatriot Kal-El, the man from Krypton. Unlike Kal-El, who was recreated as the archetypal Boy Scout Superman, Princess Diana of Paradise Island was never quite tamed. Even a 20th century Amazon remained forever outside the societal boundaries she enforced as Wonder Woman.

Her Protean transformations after World War II mirror the social and societal upheavals of the American Century - Wonder Woman has survived '50s repression, '60s anti-traditionalism, feminist appropriation in the '70s, "New Age" Hellenizing in the '80s, and sexual degradation in the '90s. A contradictory text, Princess Diana has always teetered between binaries: male-female, peace-war, heterosexual and homosocial. Yet these very antitheses are present in her classical roots, and are what so easily enable her continued reincarnations. Her multifaceted, iconic success even questions traditional interpretations of the role Amazons played for the Greek patriarchal psyche.

Marston truly believed that women would - should - take over the world, and therefore idealized a mythological matriarchy. Unlike the Greeks, modern men would willingly "submit" to strong women. Yet Diana herself often speculated on how to make Steve Trevor - her Lois Lane - super-strong. She both dominated and wished to be dominated. Ironically, Marston's creation has been controlled by men, for men, from the very beginning - yet has remained a symbol of female empowerment around the globe. An ideal symbol and a perfect consumer product, Wonder Woman, like her ancient Amazon sisters, can be digested by misogynists and feminists alike.