

## Patty Jenkins' Wonder Woman: "A Bridge to a Greater Understanding"

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At six years old, I remember watching coverage of the 1984 women's Olympic marathon with some surprise and confusion. I knew something about marathons because earlier that summer my family had gone to cheer on my aunt as she competed in a local half-marathon race. I liked running and was proud to say that I was "the fastest girl" in my class.

This Olympic race was historic for many reasons. One, it was the inaugural women's marathon, and two, that one of the competitors took nearly five minutes to stagger around the track and finished in a terrifying conclusion that almost confirmed the long-running fear that marathons were too dangerous for women to undertake. Still, I remember thinking, I ran a mile in my kindergarten Thanksgiving "Turkey Trot." Why would a grown woman not be allowed to run much further?

The Olympics originated in ancient Greece, of course, in a culture where women were mainly treated as slaves to their homes and families. Perhaps it is ironic then, that William Moulton Marston turned to Greek mythology to create a character in the spirit of early 20th century feminism. With her dominatrix-inspired attire and equipment, Wonder Woman, or Diana Prince, has been one of the most popular characters in the DC universe for more than 70 years.

I didn't read comic books as a kid. For me, Wonder Woman came to life in syndication, with Lynda Carter as the confident heroine. But, to be honest, the *Wonder Woman* television show was not my favorite. Carter was beautiful and smart, but I wanted to see how she got so powerful. I

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wanted to see her train for battle and struggle to get stronger, like my favorite movie character – Rocky Balboa.

I was never a fan of boxing, but I identified with Rocky because (yes, like Wonder Woman) he tried to do the right thing and saw goodness in people when others didn't. I probably should have identified with Rocky's love interest, Adrian. Like her, I was quiet and shy. I was female. But I was inspired by Rocky's physical and emotional struggles – that somehow seemed tied together. I wanted to train like him and to know what it felt like to fight and to push myself as far as I could go, with no limits or restrictions.

Athletics have defined my life in important ways. I ran marathons of my own, swam in college, and have remained competitive in other sports to this day. But I have always had a feeling of needing to hold myself back – of not being allowed to be more than the best female in the competition. As a child, I learned that boys didn't like to be bested by a girl in a race. In my experience, men liked it even less.

But I studied the history of women in sport when I was in college, looking for role models and inspiration. I read about Lynn Hill, the first person to free climb "The Nose" in Yosemite Valley, California in one day. I read about Babe Didrickson, arguably the best athlete in US history. I watched footage of Billy Jean King in the "Battle of the Sexes," and I read about women who had won ultramarathons and long-distance swim races outright.

In *Playing with the Boys: Why Separate is Not Equal in Sport*, the authors make the argument that men and women must compete together and against each other. In that case, if we raised our expectations and, at the same time, encouraged women to be as good as or better than men, the gender gap in athletic performance would close (McDonagh and Pappano 3-15).

William Moulton Marston created Wonder Woman in this spirit of women's excellence. Raised in a household of doting women, and with

birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger as inspiration, he believed in women's rights, including their right to physical and sexual freedom (Lepore 1-23). Of course, his conceptualization of sexual freedom was dubious, both in his theorization and actual practice. Wonder Woman's whip and skimpy clothing were never innocent. It was a good effort on Marston's part, but he missed the mark in some ways.

Fast forward to Patty Jenkins, the first woman to produce a superhero movie. Before seeing the movie, I had watched interviews of Jenkins and Gal Gadot. They seem confident, poised, strong. And Robin Wright is one of my all-time favorite actors. But, all of these women are beautiful and thin. So, how was this movie going to be any different from those where the male "gaze" shaped the scope and tenor of the film?

Let me count the ways ...

First, women's physical strength and leadership ground and foreground this story. In the early minutes of the film, we see something that cinema has rarely (if ever?) given us: dozens of very athletic women, the Amazons, fighting and training for battle together—this, overseen by a female general. We move to another scene where Diana is pleading with her mother to let her train with the Amazons, and then another scene where the Amazonian political leaders deliberate about how to protect themselves from the Great War. These scenes are several among many that show women leading the conversation and action in this film, using their physical strength or courageous leadership. What's also exceedingly rare here is that we see women lead in places where they have historically (and still often are) excluded, like politics and war.

Notably, in 1985, comic writer Alison Bechdel argued that movies are so bereft of women's perspectives and dialog, a viewer would have trouble finding a film that includes a single scene where two women talk to each other about something other than a man. Bechdel is now well-known for creating the "Bechdel test," which asks whether a movie has – "1. ... at least two [named] women in it. 2. Who talk to each other. 3. About

something besides a man” (Bechdel). Movies continue to fail this test spectacularly, including super-hero films like *Spider-Man: Homecoming*” and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. *Wonder Woman* passes the test with flying colors (Bechdel).

Second, and contrary to my initial concerns, this film does not participate in “the gaze,” or the sexually-objectified, heteronormative male perspective from which movies are often filmed. When Captain Steve Trevor and Diana kiss, for example, the camera is on him more than it is on her. There is no gratuitous sex scene. Yes, the Amazons’ attire reveals muscled arms and legs – but not in a way that objectifies. On the contrary, *Wonder Woman* spends much of the film covered in a long, heavy cloak.

Diana makes clear, in conversation with Trevor’s secretary Etta Candy, that the Amazons’ attire is designed to provide freedom of movement so they can train for battle. This rationale is important for Jenkins to articulate in the film because it asks viewers to see *Wonder Woman* differently – not as a sex object, but as an athlete and soldier. Also, Diana’s frustration with early twentieth century British women’s fashion provides a comedic moment, but also a fair commentary on how women’s clothing has, historically, served to undermine our athleticism and independence.

In a similar vein, the third way that this film differs in its representation of women lies in the fact that Jenkins gives viewers an alternative version of physical prowess. Some reviewers have criticized the Amazon’s training and battle sequences, calling these pieces ineffective or “humdrum” (Edelstein). I would argue that these scenes suggest that we can value grace as much as we value power, and flexibility as much as strength. But also, these scenes show that physical strength can be tied to concepts like femininity, community, and empathy.

Like *Rocky*, Diana trains and pushes to be the strongest and best fighter. But also, she has a kind of embodied, empathic drive to use her abilities to help those who are suffering. In those scenes leading up to

Wonder Woman's walk into "No Man's Land," we see her struggle to stay on Trevor's mission. After passing horses suffering, soldiers wounded, and children separated from their families, the pleas from a woman to free her village convince Diana to stop holding herself back.

As Wonder Woman climbs the steps out of the trench and into the line of fire, she effectively decouples superior physical ability from masculinity. In Trevor's pleas for Diana to stay on mission, I could hear the echoes from my childhood – "you did great for a girl. That's good enough." Wonder Woman leaves "good enough" at the bottom of that World War I trench, taking machine gun-fire, an act which allows soldiers to break through their year-long stalemate. The scene is wonderfully liberating and cathartic for women who are athletes and for anyone tired of the suggestion that a woman will never be the strongest, most physically capable person in the room, or in this case, on the battlefield.

For all that the movie does well, however, the last quarter of *Wonder Woman* was initially deeply dissatisfying for me in that it seems to convey an old, sexist trope – that a woman finds her real power in love for a man – specifically, in sleeping with a man. I wanted Wonder Woman to remain above that cliché. And throughout the film, I wanted her to be savvier about modern culture and the sources of women's oppression. I also wanted her foe, Ares, to seem like a more even match. For most of the film, Sir Patrick hobbles from scene to scene, talking about making peace and working to establish the armistice. At first, his incarnation as Ares seemed dubious at best. Was this just a reinvention of Bobby Riggs versus Billy Jean King? David Thewlis at 54 is, after all, only one year younger than Riggs at the time of the infamous tennis match.

But, maybe Jenkins is inviting us to view these "flaws" in another way. In one sense, yes, the love story is a cliché. But I am starting to think that reading is shallow and misses the nuance of this film. In the final battle scenes, for example, Ares tries to convince Wonder Woman to aid him in his quest to terminate humans. In a fit of rage at Trevor's death, she

is nearly compelled to do so – until she sees the tear running down Dr. Isabel Maru’s cheek, and sees her three comrades in arms bowed in embrace when they realize death may be imminent. And, yes, she realizes that Trevor gives his life in the name of love, and retorts back to Ares that “love” is what moves her to fight for humankind. But, I think it is important to note that there’s more than one kind of love.

In ancient Greek – in Diana’s culture – there were at least six different words for love – in this case, the most relevant words might be *philia* or love among friends and *agape* or empathy for all people. Certainly, there is also *eros* or sexual passion. But Diana’s actions – not to mention those of those of Trevor’s and his companions’ – are mainly defined by deep friendship and empathy (“Love”).

Of course, Diana makes it clear that erotic love between women was a part of Amazonian life. The fact that she sleeps with Trevor might seem counter to that culture, contributing to a heteronormative narrative. But it is not inconsistent with Wonder Woman’s ethos that she would pursue love wherever it might lead her. Moreover, her judgment is not clouded by this encounter – only Trevor’s judgment is clouded in that he initially prevents her from killing General Ludendorff and doesn’t want her to seek him out in the first place because he says this quest is too dangerous. Both he and Diana know this is an absurd argument because she is a more capable soldier, and less prone to injury than Trevor or any other soldier in the war.

It is true, we see that she is naïve to gender politics and social mores of the early twentieth century – but why shouldn’t that be the case? This is not her culture. Why would we expect Diana to intuitively know that her beauty is something that might be used against her, that her appearance is something that is “distracting” for other people, that her strength and intelligence are shocking on the order of surreal? Jenkins is making the obvious argument here that misogyny, sexism, and women’s inferiority are culturally constructed, and not at all natural.

Maru and Ms. Candy are both examples of what happens to smart, capable women in a misogynist culture. The fate of the war rests on Maru's ability to devise a deadlier gas. But she is fearful, doubting herself when she can't come up with the formula she seeks. Maru works under Ludendorff's supervision. The opportunity to use her chemical genius comes at his pleasure and as a tool of hate in a war of men. In a similar vein, Ms. Candy is stunned at Sir Patrick's proposal that she lead their rogue operation and, at first, doubts her ability.

But shouldn't Diana have faced a more formidable foe? What about Lex Luther or even Superman? I would argue, if we suggest that an "old man" is not a sufficient foe for Wonder Woman, then we are letting ageism and ableism dictate our view of what's possible. More importantly, we forget that the old man body is just a guise to hide a god who literally killed all the other gods of Olympus in his quest to rid the world of human protectors and then humans after that work was done. Let's also not forget that Thewlis transformed from mild-mannered Professor Lupin to a deadly werewolf that nearly took out Harry Potter—the boy who survived death itself. No, Thewlis is not Henry Cavill— but in important ways, his characters are just as formidable.

Who Diana will battle in future films remains an open question, and I will not enter into that debate. The greater point, for me and for many others, is that this new incarnation of Wonder Women is a re-visioning of women's physical strength and power. This is no small feat. Certainly, her physical body does not offer a visualization of all the ways that different kinds and colors of feminine bodies can be strong and powerful. But I believe this film opens a door that more and diverse representations can walk through. As Jenkins reminds us, "There is no 'right' and 'wrong' kind of powerful woman" (France).

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