

Lynda Carter: The Original Wonder Woman

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On June 2, 2017, the long-awaited *Wonder Woman* hit movie theaters worldwide. Starring Gal Gadot in the title role and Christopher Pine as her paramour, Steve Trevor, *Wonder Woman* is a discovery tale about Princess Diana leaving her home on Paradise Island to fight the God of War during WW1 and claim her mantle as Wonder Woman. According to the website Box Office Mojo, in the opening weekend, the movie made \$103.2 million; it ran for 10 weeks, grossing \$411.6 million in the United States and \$819.5 million worldwide, making it the number one movie of the summer. I saw the movie five days after it opened and loved it. I was thrilled to see her brought to life with humor, enthusiasm, and sincerity.

I have been a fan of Wonder Woman since I was a child, watching her cartoons and live action television show. So, imagine my surprise when I heard women make the following comparisons between the 1975 television Wonder Woman and the 2017 movie Wonder Woman on the radio show *IA*:

Emily, caller: "I never liked the old Wonder Woman from TV. I felt like she was parading around in a bathing suit. . . . I didn't know what I was missing until I felt it . . ."

Laura Boyes, guest and film curator for North Carolina Museum of Art: "Wonder Woman was not sexualized [in the movie]. . . . There's no cleavage; she's not wearing underpants like previous incarnations of Wonder Woman. . . . she was not being presented

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to the male gaze in that exact way . . . ” (“*IA Movie Club Sees Wonder Woman*” 00:02:25-00:06:46)

At any given time, there are two versions of Wonder Woman found in popular culture: the original William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter’s *Wonder Woman* and Wonder Woman, the feminist icon (Berlatsky 3-6). I would contend that at least a third version exists—the “any woman can be Wonder Woman” that exists in our minds. This Wonder Woman exists in any one moment in time as a repository for—or to meliorate—our values and anxieties. Praise for Gadot’s performance notwithstanding, Lynda Carter is the Wonder Woman that exists in *MY* mind.

To appreciate truly Carter’s contribution to the mythos of Wonder Woman, one must accept that the mid-1970s was a different time for women. “Widespread dissatisfaction with being denied routinely admission to higher education, being paid less than men for the same work, and being ineligible for many bank loans and credit cards” (McClelland-Nugent 136) shifted the attentions of the women’s movement away from legal issues, like the right to vote, toward broader social issues, like domestic violence and reproductive rights. “Growing up in a world where traditionally feminine qualities were valued as much or more than masculine qualities, Wonder Woman was an attractive figure for feminists seeking a pop culture analogue for their values” (Levine 137). Douglas Cramer, producer of the 1975 television series, wanted to capitalize on this dynamic by casting a woman “built like a javelin thrower but with the sweet face of a Mary Tyler Moore” (Levine 137) for his new adventure show. Enter Lynda Carter. Not quite understanding this opportunity to connect with second wave feminists, another one of the show’s male producers warned her, “Oh, women are gonna be so jealous of you.” Determined to make the show a success, Carter responded, “Well, not a chance. They won’t be, because I’m not playing her that way. I want women to want to *be* me, or be my best friend!” (“The Enduring Strength of Wonder Woman”).

When I was a kid, I loved Lynda Carter. She resonated with me as Wonder Woman in the same way that Arnold Schwarzenegger did as Conan the Barbarian—both became *the* character in my mind because they looked like the comic book versions without enhancement. Both casting choices facilitated the suspension of disbelief necessary to accept a Nazi fighting, Amazon princess and a barbarian warrior who slays monsters. According to Fingerroth, “The powerful woman who is also a good ‘guy’ is a relatively new phenomenon. Up until the 1990s, in pop culture, if a woman was powerful—*really* powerful—she was either evil, or made evil by the power” (80). The *IA* female caller and its female guest found *THEIR* good guy/powerful woman in Gadot, but, in the process, thought it necessary to dismiss *MY* 1970s version. Many critics reduce Carter’s success as Wonder Woman to her beauty and shapely figure. But Carter is more than what could be seen in a photograph or screenshot; she is what she represented to her audience at the time.

My most vivid memories of Lynda Carter are the occasions when she stood next to men on awards shows and was either taller than they were or could look them in the eye. At 5’9, she was a striking figure. To a 4’5 black girl, she looked like a 6’ tall Amazon giant, an illusion promoted by the show’s publicity team (Levine 137). Again, to me, men seemed to defer to her, and that was rare in the seventies. “Our society’s ideals of fair play demanded there be superheroines. But our society’s ingrained, conflicted, and unconscious feelings toward powerful women made the creation of truly crowd-pleasing superhero women take decades—generations—longer to develop than their male counterparts” (Fingerroth 82). Carter, half Hispanic and half Native American, did not demure to men; she was/is forthright in her speech and direct in her gaze. She was the first to embody the true spirit of the DC heroine (strong, fearless, generous, and a believer in sexual and racial equality) and, for that, was probably my first television role model.

Criticisms of Wonder Woman's appearance are not unique to Carter's portrayal of the character. Gadot has to contend with complaints that her breasts are too small to play the superheroine (Dray). However, sexualizing the narratives of the show and movie inferentially does not mean that the performances of the character were sexualized intentionally. Nor does it mean that the supposed "T + A" overshadowed the feminist themes for every viewer. According to one male fan of the television series,

Wonder Woman was on the surface a very typical one-hour action drama on network TV. What made it special was several key elements. The most important was the acting and presence of Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman/Diana Prince. . . . The producers were very faithful to the comics in their portrayal of Wonder Woman in not only super powers and weapons, but also her tough but peace-loving approach to problems. Wonder Woman could kick the bad guy's butt; however, she only turned loose the power after reason and compassion were rejected by the evil doers. This approach and Lynda's portrayal made the "message" imbued scripts of the writers have real impact and immediacy.
(oxnardboy)

Carter played the superheroine straight. She did not strike poses like a supermodel. There were no gratuitous body cants or displays of submission. Carter claimed, "I never played her as mousy. I played her being for women, not against men. For fair play and fair pay." (Williams)

In 1941, Marston and Peter created Wonder Woman to be feminist, pacifist, and "queer" (Berlatsky). While Carter's Wonder Woman was overtly heterosexual, her performance turned the "damsel in distress" trope upside down. During almost every show she saved someone, and most of the time, it was a man, Steve Trevor. Long after the show had been cancelled and Carter had resumed her singing career, she maintained

a Wonder Woman-like stance on LGBTQ rights. When asked in an interview if she knew she was a gay icon, Carter replied,

“I am? That’s great!” But as far as being supportive of LGBT equality, I’ve always felt that it shouldn’t even be a question. It’s a matter of basic civil rights and I don’t understand how anyone can see it differently. . . . I have to say it’s such a privilege to be embraced by the LGBT community. To be welcomed by a group that has seen so much discrimination over the years—it’s just an honor. (Peeples)

Carter knew she was not Wonder Woman, but she gladly became the character’s avatar online and in person when advocating for LGBTQ rights and marriage equality. And while Carter’s portrayal of Wonder Woman was a product of its time, she has kept the character’s original values alive on social media for at least the last ten years (Masaki).

Forty years separate the versions of Wonder Woman performed by Carter and Gadot. During the seventies, it was miniskirts, bikinis, and birth control; now, it is smartphones, social media, and calls for diversity. After watching Gadot perform Wonder Woman in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, Carter became one of her biggest cheerleaders. When asked about her readiness to pass the mantle to Gadot, Carter said,

When [the movie] was first given a green light, it would be dishonest of me to say I didn’t have a little pang of “well, here it goes.” But after my first conversation with Patty, I felt I had linked arms with a woman who I would go through the rest of my life with. And then when I met Gal, I linked the other arm with her. The three of us really understand what being on the inside of Wonder Woman’s skin feels like. I mean, so does anyone who ever believed in herself as Wonder Woman, whether it was a little girl or a gay boy—they know, too. (Heil)

Lynda Carter may not have been a perfect Wonder Woman by today's standards, but she was the right choice for that time. She understood Wonder Woman and respected what the character meant to her fans. She was the first woman to carry a one-hour adventure television show when men said it could not be done. She was the first to embody the character convincingly without elaborate special effects or the care and wisdom of a female director. To the female caller and the female guest on the radio show *IA*, "Hey, let's practice the sisterhood that Wonder Woman preaches!" Lynda Carter deserves credit for being a pioneer as Wonder Woman. She has earned the right to be *MY* Wonder Woman.

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