

THE LAST AMAZON

Wonder Woman returns.

BY JILL LEPORE



Wonder Woman, introduced in 1941, was a creation of utopian feminism, inspired by Margaret Sanger and the ideals of free love.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANT CORNETT

The Wonder Woman Family Museum occupies a one-room bunker beneath a two-story house on a hilly street in Bethel, Connecticut. It contains more than four thousand objects. Their arrangement is higgledy-piggledy. There are Wonder Woman lunchboxes, face masks, coffee mugs, a Frisbee, napkins, record-players, T-shirts, bookends, a trailer-hitch cover, plates and cups, pencils, kites, and, near the floor, a pressed-aluminum cake mold, her breasts like cupcakes. A cardboard stand holds Pez dispensers, red, topped with Wonder Woman's head. Wonder Woman backpacks hang from hooks; sleeping bags are rolled up on a shelf. On a ten-foot-wide stage whose backdrop depicts ancient Greece—the Parthenon atop the Acropolis—Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons, a life-size mannequin wearing sandals and a toga, sits on a throne. To her left stands her daughter, Princess Diana, a mannequin dressed as Wonder Woman: a golden tiara on top of a black wig; a red bustier

embossed with an American eagle, its wings spread to form the letters “WW”; a blue miniskirt with white stars; bracelets that can stop bullets; a golden lasso strapped to her belt; and, on her feet, super-kinky knee-high red boots. Nearby, a Wonder Woman telephone rests on a glass shelf. The telephone is unplugged.

Superman debuted in 1938, Batman in 1939, Wonder Woman in 1941. She was created by William Moulton Marston, a psychologist with a Ph.D. from Harvard. A press release explained, “ ‘Wonder Woman’ was conceived by Dr. Marston to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations and professions monopolized by men” because “the only hope for civilization is the greater freedom, development and equality of women in all fields of human activity.” Marston put it this way: “Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.”

The house in Bethel belongs to Marston’s oldest son, Moulton Marston. He’s eighty-six. Everyone calls him Pete. “I started it six or seven years ago when I had so much Wonder Woman stuff lying around,” he says. A particular strength of the collection is its assortment of Wonder Woman dolls, action figures, and statuary. They come in every size, in ceramic, paper, rubber, plastic, and cloth; jointed, inflatable, and bobble-headed. Most are posed standing, legs astride, arms akimbo, fists clenched, half sassy, half badass. In a corner, blue eye-shadowed, pouty-lipped Wonder Woman Barbie dolls, tiaras missing, hair unkempt, have been crammed into a Wonder Woman wastebasket.

Many of the objects in the Wonder Woman Family Museum date to the nineteen-seventies, when DC Comics, which owns Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, was newly affiliated with Warner Bros.

Between 1975 and 1979, Warner Bros. produced a Wonder Woman TV series, starring Lynda Carter, a former beauty queen. Since 1978, Warner Bros. has made six Superman films and eight Batman films, but, to the consternation of Wonder Woman fans, there has never been a Wonder Woman film. This is about to change. Last December, Warner Bros. announced that Wonder Woman would have a role in an upcoming Superman-and-Batman film, and that, in a three-movie deal, Gal Gadot, a lithe Israeli model, had signed on to play the part. There followed a flurry of comments about her anatomical insufficiency for the role.

“It’s been said that you’re too skinny,” an interviewer told Gadot on Israeli television. “Wonder Woman is large-breasted.”

“Wonder Woman is Amazonian,” Gadot said, smiling coyly. “And historically accurate Amazonian women actually had only one breast.” (They cut off the other one, the better to wield a bow.)

The film, being shot this summer and fall in Detroit and Chicago, is a sequel to last year’s “Man of Steel,” directed by Zack Snyder, with Henry Cavill as Superman. For the new film, Ben Affleck was cast as Batman. One critic tweeted this suggestion for a title: “BATMAN VS. SUPERMAN WITH ALSO SOME WONDER WOMAN IN THERE SO SIT DOWN LADIES WE’RE TREATING YOU FINE: THE MOVIE.” Warner Bros. has yet to dispel this impression. In May, the company announced that the film would be called “Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice.”

“You can talk all you want about other superhero movies, but it’s Batman and Superman, let’s just be honest,” Snyder said in an interview with *USA Today* in July. “I don’t know how you get bigger than that.”

The much cited difficulties regarding putting Wonder Woman on film—Wonder Woman isn't big enough, and neither are Gal Gadot's breasts—aren't chiefly about Wonder Woman, or comic books, or superheroes, or movies. They're about politics. Superman owes a debt to science fiction, Batman to the hardboiled detective. Wonder Woman's debt is to feminism. She's the missing link in a chain of events that begins with the woman-suffrage campaigns of the nineteen-tens and ends with the troubled place of feminism a century later. Wonder Woman is so hard to put on film because the fight for women's rights has gone so badly.

“In the days of ancient Greece, many centuries ago, we Amazons were the foremost nation in the world,” Hippolyte explains to her daughter in “Introducing Wonder Woman,” the character's debut, in a 1941 issue of *All-Star Comics*. “In Amazonia, women ruled and all was well.” Alas, that didn't last: men conquered and made women slaves. The Amazons escaped, sailing across the ocean to an uncharted island where they lived in peace for centuries until, one day, Captain Steve Trevor, a U.S. Army officer, crashed his plane there. “A man!” Princess Diana cries when she finds him. “A man on Paradise Island!” After rescuing him, she flies him in her invisible plane to “America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women!”

“How does this make you feel?”

Wonder Woman's origin story comes straight out of feminist utopian fiction. In the nineteenth century, suffragists, following the work of anthropologists, believed that something like the Amazons of Greek myth had once existed, a matriarchy that predated the rise of patriarchy. “The period of woman's supremacy lasted through many centuries,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in 1891. In the nineteen-tens, this idea became a staple of feminist thought. The word “feminism,” hardly



ever used in the United States before 1910, was everywhere by 1913. The suffrage movement had been founded on a set of ideas about women's supposed moral superiority. Feminism rested on the principle of equality. Suffrage was a single, elusive political goal. Feminism's demand for equality was far broader. "All feminists are suffragists, but not all suffragists are feminists," as one feminist explained. They shared an obsession with Amazons.

In 1913, Max Eastman, a founder of the New York Men's League for Woman Suffrage and the editor of *The Masses*, published "Child of the Amazons and Other Poems." In the title poem, an Amazonian girl falls in love with a man but can't marry him until "the far age when men shall cease/ Their tyranny, Amazons their revolt." The next year, Inez Haynes Gillmore, who, like Mary Woolley, the president of Mount Holyoke College, had helped found college suffrage leagues, published a novel called "Angel Island," in which five American men are shipwrecked on a desert island that turns out to be inhabited by "super-humanly beautiful" women with wings, who, by the end of the novel, walk "with the splendid, swinging gait of an Amazon."

Gillmore and Max Eastman's sister Crystal were members of Heterodoxy, a group of Greenwich Village feminists. So was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In 1915, Gilman published "Herland," in which women live free from men, bearing only daughters, by parthenogenesis. (On Paradise Island, Queen Hippolyte carves her daughter out of clay.) In these stories' stock plots, men are allowed to live with women only on terms of equality, and, for that to happen, there has to be a way for the men and women to have sex without the women getting pregnant all the time. The women in Gilman's utopia practice what was called "voluntary motherhood." "You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity," Gilman wrote, "but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People." At the time, contraception was illegal. In 1914, Margaret Sanger, another

started a magazine called *The Woman Rebel*, in which she coined the phrase “birth control” and insisted that “the right to be a mother regardless of church or state” was the “basis of Feminism.”

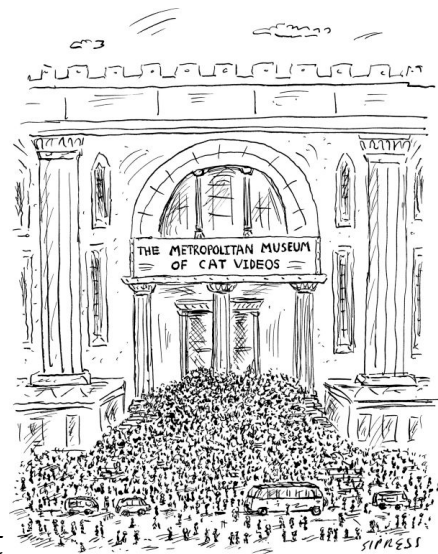
In 1917, when motion pictures were still a novelty and the United States had only just entered the First World War, Sanger starred in a silent film called “Birth Control”; it was banned. A century of warfare, feminism, and cinema later, superhero movies—adaptations and updates of mid-twentieth-century comic books whose plots revolve around anxieties about mad scientists, organized crime, tyrannical super-states, alien invaders, misunderstood mutants, and world-ending weapons—are the super-blockbusters of the last superpower left standing. No one knows how Wonder Woman will fare onscreen: there’s hardly ever been a big-budget superhero movie starring a female superhero. But more of the mystery lies in the fact that Wonder Woman’s origins have been, for so long, so unknown. It isn’t only that Wonder Woman’s backstory is taken from feminist utopian fiction. It’s that, in creating Wonder Woman, William Moulton Marston was profoundly influenced by early-twentieth-century suffragists, feminists, and birth-control advocates and that, shockingly, Wonder Woman was inspired by Margaret Sanger, who, hidden from the world, was a member of Marston’s family.

Marston entered Harvard College, as a freshman, in 1911. That fall, the Harvard Men’s League for Woman Suffrage invited the British militant Emmeline Pankhurst to give a lecture; the Harvard Corporation banned her from speaking on campus. The news made headlines all over the United States. “IS HARVARD AFRAID OF MRS. PANKHURST?” one newspaper asked. (The answer was yes.)

Undaunted, Pankhurst spoke in Harvard Square. “The most ignorant young man, who knows nothing of the needs of women, thinks himself a competent legislator, because he is a man,” Pankhurst told the crowd, eyeing the Harvard men. In 1915, Marston married Elizabeth Holloway, who’d just graduated from Mount Holyoke,

where she studied Greek, read Sappho, and became a feminist. Her hero was Mary Woolley, who lived for fifty-five years with Jeannette Marks, an English professor and an ardent suffragist. “Feminism is not a prejudice,” Woolley explained. “It is a principle.” In 1916, Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to Congress, and Margaret Sanger and her sister Ethel Byrne, both nurses, opened the first birth-control clinic in the United States, in Brooklyn. (Sanger and Byrne founded what later became Planned Parenthood.) Byrne was arrested and, inspired by Pankhurst and her followers, went on a hunger strike that nearly killed her. In a statement to the press, she called attention to the number of women who die during abortions. “With the Health Department reporting 8,000 deaths a year in the State from illegal operations on women, one more death won’t make much difference, anyway,” she said. Against Byrne’s wishes, Sanger, hoping to save her sister’s life, made a deal with the governor of New York; he issued a pardon for Byrne on the condition that Sanger promise that her sister would never again participate in the birth-control movement.

Marston graduated from Harvard Law School in 1918; Holloway graduated from Boston University’s law school the same year. (Harvard Law School did not admit women.) Women finally gained the right to vote in 1920. That year, in her book “Woman and the New Race,” Sanger wrote, “The most far-reaching development of modern times is the revolt of woman against sex servitude,” and promised that contraception would “remake the world.” Marston finished his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1921, after a stint of service during the First World War. His research had to do with emotions. His dissertation concerned the detection of deception, as measured by changes in



blood pressure. (Marston is often credited with inventing the lie-detector test, which is why Wonder Woman carries a magic lasso that makes anyone she ropes tell the truth.) He was also interested in another preoccupation of psychologists: sex, sexual difference, and sexual adjustment. Lewis Terman, who helped develop the I.Q. test, also helped create a test to measure “masculinity” and “femininity”: its purpose was to identify deviance. According to the behaviorist John B. Watson, feminism itself was a form of deviance. “Most of the terrible women one must meet, women with the blatant views and voices, women who have to be noticed, who shoulder one about, who can’t take life quietly, belong to this large percentage of women who have never made a sex adjustment,” Watson wrote in *The Nation*. Marston’s research ran in a different direction. In “Sex Characteristics of Systolic Blood Pressure Behavior,” published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, he reported on a series of tests that he and Holloway had conducted on ten men and ten women at Harvard between 1919 and 1921, while Holloway was pursuing a graduate degree in psychology at Radcliffe. They’d tried to get their subjects upset, and then they’d tried to arouse them. He believed his study demonstrated that women are more emotional than men and that women’s emotions are often rooted in their sexuality (“there being a far greater number of adequate stimuli to sex-emotion in the female organism”). He also found out he really liked studying sex.

He then embarked on an academic career. Gaining the right to vote had by no means automatically led to political equality. The Equal Rights Amendment, drafted by Alice Paul, was first introduced to Congress in 1923. At the time, women were denied the right to serve on juries in thirty-one states. At American University, Marston and Holloway conducted a series of experiments whose findings, he said, demonstrated that women are more reliable jurors than men: “They were more careful, more conscientious and gave much more impartial consideration to all the testimony than did the male juries.” Marston was fired from American University, after he was arrested for fraud, in

connection with some business dealings. (All the charges were later dropped.) He next taught at Tufts, where, in 1925, he fell in love with one of his students: Ethel Byrne's daughter Olive.

At Tufts, Marston and Olive Byrne conducted research together. Byrne took him to her sorority, Alpha Omicron Pi, where freshmen pledges were required to dress up like babies and attend a "Baby Party." Marston later described it: "The freshmen girls were led into a dark corridor where their eyes were blindfolded, and their arms were bound behind them." Then the freshmen were taken into a room where juniors and seniors compelled them to do various tasks, while sophomores hit them with long sticks. "Nearly all the sophomores reported excited pleasantness of captivation emotion throughout the party," Marston reported. (Marston's interest in what he called "captivation emotion" informs the bondage in *Wonder Woman*.)

Beginning in 1925, Marston, Holloway, Byrne, and a librarian named Marjorie Wilkes Huntley, whom Marston had met during the war, attended regular meetings at the Boston apartment of Marston's aunt, Carolyn Keatley. Keatley believed in the teachings contained in a book called "The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ," by a preacher named Levi H. Dowling. She thought that she was living in the dawn of the Age of Aquarius, the beginning of a new astrological age, an age of love: the New Age. Minutes for the meetings held at Keatley's apartment describe a sexual "clinic," involving Love Leaders, Mistresses (or Mothers), and Love Girls. A Love Leader, a Mistress, and their Love Girl form a Love Unit, a perfect constellation. There is much in the minutes about sex itself; e.g., "During the act of intercourse between the male and his Mistress, the male's love organ stimulates the inner love organs of the Mistress, and not the external love organs," but "if anyone wishes to develop the consciousness of submission, he or she must keep the sexual orgasm in check, and thus permit the nervous energy to flow freely and uninterruptedly into the external genital organs." There is also much in the minutes about

Marston's theory of dominance and submission; females, "in their relation to males, expose their bodies and use various legitimate methods of the Love sphere to create in males submission to them, the women mistresses or Love leaders, in order that they, the Mistresses, may submit in passion to the males."

In 1926, Olive Byrne, then twenty-two, moved in with Marston and Holloway; they lived as a threesome, "with love making for all," as Holloway later said. Olive Byrne is the mother of two of Marston's four children; the children had three parents. "Both Mommies and poor old Dad" is how Marston put it.

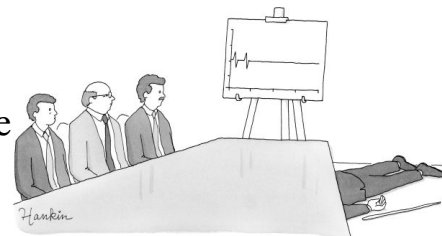
Holloway said that Marston, Holloway, and Byrne's living arrangements began as an idea: "A new way of living has to exist in the minds of men before it can be realized in actual form." It had something to do with Sanger's "Woman and the New Race." Holloway tried to explain what she'd taken away from reading it: "The new race will have a far greater love capacity than the current one and I mean physical love as well as other forms." And it had something to do with what Havelock Ellis, a British doctor who was one of Margaret Sanger's lovers, called "the erotic rights of women." Ellis argued that the evolution of marriage as an institution had resulted in the prohibiting of female sexual pleasure, which was derided as wanton and abnormal. Erotic equality, he insisted in 1918, was no less important than political equality, if more difficult to achieve. "The right to joy cannot be claimed in the same way as one claims the right to put a voting paper in a ballot box," he wrote. "That is why the erotic rights of women have been the last of all to be attained."

But there was more to it. For Holloway, the arrangement solved what, in the era of the New Woman, was known as the "woman's dilemma": hardly a magazine was sold, in those years, that didn't feature an article that asked, "Can a Woman Run a Home and a Job, Too?" The

modern woman, Crystal Eastman explained in *The Nation*, “wants some means of self-expression, perhaps, some way of satisfying her personal ambitions. But she wants a husband, home and children, too. How to reconcile these two desires in real life, that is the question.” You can find more or less the very same article in almost any magazine today—think of Anne-Marie Slaughter’s 2012 essay, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All”—which is a measure of just how poorly this question has been addressed. A century ago, though, it was new. Between 1910 and 1920, Virginia MacMakin Collier reported in 1926, in “Marriage and Careers,” the percentage of married women working had nearly doubled, and the number of married women in the professions had risen by forty per cent. “The question, therefore, is no longer, should women combine marriage with careers, but how?”

Here’s how. Marston would have two wives. Holloway could have her career. Byrne would raise the children. No one else need ever know.

The scandal of Marston’s family arrangements, which, inevitably, became known to his close colleagues, cost him his academic career. This kind of thing happens all the time in *Wonder Woman*. “What are you doing here?” Dean Sourpuss, of Holliday College, asks Professor Toxino. “You know you’re not welcome at this college!” In the nineteen-twenties, Marston barely held any appointment longer than a year, and, with each move, he climbed another step down the academic ladder. At American University, he’d been a full professor and the chair of the Psychology Department. Tufts appointed him an untenured assistant professor. In 1928, while he was teaching at Columbia—on a one-year appointment, as a lecturer—he published a book called “Emotions of Normal People,” as part of a series called the International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method. (Other contributors to the series included Wittgenstein,



Piaget, and Adler.) Its chief argument is that much in emotional and sexual life that is generally regarded as abnormal and is therefore commonly hidden actually inheres within the very structure of the nervous system. The work of the clinical psychologist, Marston argued, is to provide patients with an “emotional re-education”: “People must be taught that the love parts of themselves, which they have come to regard as abnormal, are completely normal.”

Marston’s interests in deception, sex, and emotion fed a long-standing interest in film. He’d worked his way through Harvard by selling screenplays. In 1915, after the Edison Company held a nationwide talent search among American college students, promising a hundred dollars to the author of the best movie scenario submitted by a student at one of ten colleges—Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Cornell, Princeton, and the Universities of California, Chicago, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—Marston won. The resulting film, “Jack Kennard, Coward,” played at scattered theatres across the country, in some places sharing a billing with Charlie Chaplin. In 1916, Marston’s undergraduate adviser, Hugo Münsterberg, who ran Harvard’s Psychological Laboratory, published a psychological theory of cinema. (Münsterberg, who vehemently opposed both the suffrage and the feminist movements, is the inspiration for Wonder Woman’s arch-nemesis, Doctor Psycho.) In 1928, when it became clear to Marston that his academic career was doomed, he returned to his earlier interest in the movies. Working with Byrne, who was, at the time, pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology at Columbia, he conducted a series of experiments at the Embassy Theatre, in New York. He invited reporters and photographers to watch as he seated an audience of six chorus girls—three blondes and three brunettes—in the front row. The experiment was captured on newsreel footage: “Dr. William Marston tests his latest invention: the Love Meter.” Marston and Byrne hooked the girls up to blood-pressure cuffs and recorded their level of excitement as they watched the romantic climax of M-G-M’s 1926 silent film “Flesh and the Devil,” starring Greta Garbo. Marston

claimed his findings proved that brunettes are more easily aroused than blondes. Columbia did not renew Marston's appointment. Essentially, he was blacklisted. "He might fit very well in some places," the Harvard psychologist Edwin Boring wrote in a fainthearted letter of recommendation, "but in the average, normal, general department of psychology he would probably remain separated in his work, and even at times open to the charge of sensationalism."

In the summer of 1928, Carl Laemmle, the head of Universal Studios, placed a notice in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*:

Wanted—A Psychologist

Somewhere in this country there is a practical psychologist—accomplished in the science of the mind—who will fit into the Universal organization. He can be of real help in analyzing certain plot situations and forecasting how the public will react to them. As moving pictures are reaching out more and more for refinements, such a mental showman will have great influence on the screens of the world.

"Carl Laemmle Digs the 'Doc,'" *Variety* reported five months later, announcing that Universal had hired Marston, "Who Went Through Harvard Three Times Without Quitting." Marston, Holloway, Byrne, and baby Pete moved to Los Angeles. Marston was supposed to help with casting, story editing, and setting up camera shots, and, in general, to "apply psychology wherever psychology is needed." In one experiment, he showed Universal's 1929 film "The Love Trap" to a thousand college students, omitting the final scene. He wanted to know whether audiences could handle movies that end with unfinished business.

Meanwhile, Marston and his friend Walter Pitkin, who had taught at the Columbia School of Journalism, wrote a book about how to write a screenplay for the talkies. Much of "The Art of Sound Pictures,"

published in 1929, is dedicated to explaining, point by point and state by state, what could pass the censors, and what couldn't. Branding—"Scene showing branding iron in fire, if application of it is not shown"—was O.K. in New York, Ohio, and Virginia, not allowed in Pennsylvania, Maryland, or Kansas. Sex—"Man and woman (married or unmarried) walking toward bedroom, indicating contemplated intimacy, if they are not shown after the door closes on them"—depended on action. Homosexuality—"Action of characters, indicating they are perverted, as scene showing women kissing each other, if shown in long shot"—was not usually allowed.

Marston and Pitkin also founded a production company, Equitable Pictures. Pitkin scratched out a story idea for a film whose plot was to revolve "Around Bill Marston's thesis: How can a woman love & yet make a living? How be economically independent & also erotically independent?" It would be called either "Brave Woman" or "Giddy Girl." (The Giddy Girls was the stage name of Billy and Charlie Byrne, Olive Byrne's uncles; they were female impersonators on the vaudeville circuit.) Equitable Pictures was incorporated in October of 1929, days before the stock market collapsed. It folded. A woman, one woman, who could be both economically and erotically independent would have to wait out the Depression. She'd have to have been a superhero, anyway. And superheroes hadn't quite been invented yet.

Marston spent most of the nine-teen-thirties unemployed, supported by Holloway, who worked for Metropolitan Life Insurance, while Olive Byrne raised their four children in a sprawling house they called Cherry Orchard, in Rye, New York. Byrne also wrote for *Family Circle*, using the pen name Olive Richard. Her first article, a cover story from 1935, was a profile of Marston. In the story, she pretends they're strangers. She goes to visit him. Marston attaches a blood-pressure cuff to Byrne's arm—the machine that, in the experiments they conducted together, Byrne usually took charge of:

“Tell me what you did last evening—truth or lie, just as you like.”

I thought for a minute. Then I decided to be clever. I’d mix truth and falsehood and see if he could tell which was which.

Byrne at once hid everything about her life and, like Marston, almost compulsively exposed it. But, plainly, she adored him. He was undignified and funny and warm. She found him wonderful:

This noted scientist is the most genuine human being I’ve met. He isn’t fat—that is, in the ordinary way. He’s just enormous all over. We walked through the garden and about the grounds. The doctor asked me about my work and myself, and I told him more in 15 minutes than I’d tell my most intimate friend in a week. He’s the kind of person to whom you confide things about yourself you scarcely realize.

Margaret Sanger visited Cherry Orchard, and Olive Byrne brought the children—her two sons, Byrne and Donn, and Holloway’s two children, Pete and Olive Ann—to visit Sanger at Sanger’s house in Fishkill. (The kids called Sanger Aunt Margaret.) Sanger knew about the family intrigue and was untroubled by it. The children knew less. “The whys and wherefores of the family arrangements were never discussed with the kids—ever,” Pete says.

The kids called Holloway Keets or Keetie, for “cutie,” and Olive Byrne Dots or Dotsie, for “docile.”

“What are Mommies, Daddies, and Keeties for anyway?” Olive Ann, at the age of three, asked Olive Byrne.

“I can’t quite say myself,” she replied quietly.

In 1937, the year the American Medical Association finally endorsed contraception, Marston held a press conference in which he predicted that women would one day rule the world. He also offered a list, “in

the order of the importance of their contributions to humanity,” of six surpassingly happy and influential people: Margaret Sanger was No. 2, just after Henry Ford and just before F.D.R. The story was picked up by the Associated Press, wired across the continent, and printed in newspapers from Topeka to Tallahassee. “WOMEN WILL RULE 1,000 YEARS HENCE!” the Chicago *Tribune* announced. The Los Angeles *Times* reported, “FEMININE RULE DECLARED FACT.”

In 1940, M. C. Gaines, who published Superman, read an article in *Family Circle* by Olive Byrne. She’d been worried by reading in the papers that comic books were dangerous, and that Superman was a Fascist. “With terrible visions of Hitlerian justice in mind,” she wrote in *Family Circle*, “I went to Dr. Marston.”

“Do you think these fantastic comics are good reading for children?” she asked.

Mostly, yes, Marston said. They are pure wish fulfillment: “And the two wishes behind Superman are certainly the soundest of all; they are, in fact, our national aspirations of the moment—to develop unbeatable national might, and to use this great power, when we get it, to protect innocent, peace-loving people from destructive, ruthless evil.”

Gaines decided to hire Marston as a consultant. Marston convinced Gaines that what he needed, to counter the critics, was a female superhero. The idea was for her to become a member of the Justice Society of America, a league of superheroes that held its first meeting in *All-Star Comics No. 3*, in the winter of 1940: “Each of them is a hero in his own right, but when the Justice Society calls, they are only members, sworn to uphold honor and justice!” Wonder Woman’s début appeared in December, 1941, in *All-Star Comics No. 8*. On the eve of the Second World War, she flew her invisible plane to the United States to fight for peace, justice, and women’s rights. To hide

her identity, she disguised herself as a secretary named Diana Prince and took a job working for U.S. Military Intelligence. Her gods are female, and so are her curses. “Great Hera!” she cries. “Suffering Sappho!” she swears. Her “undermeaning,” Marston explained, concerned “a great movement now under way—the growth in power of women.” Drawn by an artist named Harry G. Peter, who, in the nineteen-tens, had drawn suffrage cartoons, she looked like a pinup girl. She’s Eleanor Roosevelt; she’s Betty Grable. Mostly, she’s Margaret Sanger.

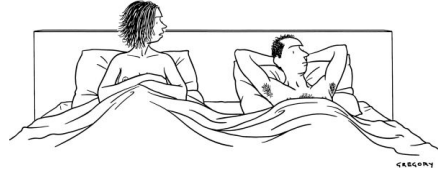
In the spring of 1942, Gaines included a one-page questionnaire in *All-Star Comics*. “Should WONDER WOMAN be allowed, even though a woman, to become a member of the Justice Society?” Of the first eighteen hundred and one questionnaires returned, twelve hundred and sixty-five boys and three hundred and thirty-three girls said yes; a hundred and ninety-seven boys, and just six girls, said no. Wonder Woman joined the Justice Society. She was the only woman. Gardner Fox, who wrote the Justice Society stories, made her the society’s secretary. In the summer of 1942, when all the male superheroes head off to war, Wonder Woman stays behind to answer the mail. “Good luck boys,” she calls out to them. “I wish I could be going with you!” Marston was furious.

In May, 1942, F.D.R. created the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. A hundred and fifty thousand women joined the Army, filling jobs that freed more men for combat. The corps “appears to be the final realization of woman’s dream of complete equality with men,” Sanger wrote in the New York *Herald-Tribune*. But she was dismayed that the government didn’t provide contraceptives for WAACs and adopted a policy of dismissing any woman who got pregnant. “This new women’s Army is a great thing, a real test of the woman’s movement,” she said. “Never before has the fight for woman’s equality narrowed down to the real issue, sex.”

In 1943, Marston wrote a Wonder Woman story called “Battle for Womanhood.” It opens with Mars, the god of war, angry that so many American women are helping with the war effort.

MAY 24, 2004

“It’s a shame there isn’t a pill to stimulate conversation.”



“There are eight million American women in war activities—by 1944 there will be eighteen million!” one of Mars’ female slaves reports, dragging a ball and chain.

“If women gain power in *war* they’ll escape man’s domination completely!” Mars thunders. “They will achieve a horrible independence! . . . If women become warriors like the Amazons, they’ll grow stronger than men and put an end to war!”

He commands the Duke of Deception to put a stop to it. The Duke enlists the aid of Doctor Psycho, who, by means of tools he’s developed in his psychological laboratory, conjures a trick in which George Washington rises from the dead and addresses a spellbound audience.

“I have a message for you—a warning!” Washington says. “*Women* will lose the war for America! Women should not be permitted to have the responsibilities they now have! Women must not make shells, torpedoes, airplane parts—they must not be trusted with war secrets or serve in the armed forces. *Women will betray their country through weakness* if not treachery!”

Wonder Woman, watching from the side, cries out, “He’s working for the Axis!” To defeat Doctor Psycho, she breaks into his laboratory, dropping in through a skylight. Captured, she’s trapped. Doctor Psycho locks her in a cage. Eventually, she’s rescued by her best friend, Etta Candy, after which she frees Psycho’s wife, Marva, whom he has blindfolded and chained to a bed.

“Submitting to a cruel husband’s domination has ruined my life!” an emancipated Marva cries. “But what can a weak girl do?”

“Get strong!” Wonder Woman urges. “Earn your own living—join the WAACs or WAVES and fight for your country!”

At the end of 1943, Wonder Woman reports to Hippolyte, “Women are gaining power in the man’s world!” Hippolyte shows Wonder Woman what lies ahead: Etta Candy will be awarded an honorary degree and become Professor of Public Health at Wonder Woman College, and Diana Prince will be President of the United States.

In 1944, Wonder Woman became the only superhero, aside from Superman and Batman, to make the jump from the pages of a comic book to daily newspaper syndication as a comic strip. Marston had so much work to do, writing Wonder Woman stories, that he hired an assistant, nineteen-year-old Joye Hummel. She’d been a student in a psychology class he taught at the Katharine Gibbs School. (Hummel, now ninety, still has the exam that Marston gave in class. It reads as though it were written by Sheryl Sandberg. Question No. 6: “Advise Miss F. how to overcome her fear of talking with the company Vice President who is in charge of her Division and whom she has plenty of opportunities to contact if she chooses; also tell Miss F. why these contacts are to her advantage.”) To help Hummel write Wonder Woman, the family gave her copies of Marston’s “Emotions of Normal People” and Sanger’s “Woman and the New Race.”

By the end of the Second World War, the number of American women working outside the home had grown by sixty per cent; three-quarters of these women were married, and a third were mothers of young children. Three-quarters of the working women hoped to keep their jobs, but they were told to make room for men returning from military service. If they didn’t quit, they were forced out: their pay was cut, and factories stopped providing child care.

Marston died in 1947. “Hire me,” Holloway wrote to DC Comics. Instead, DC hired Robert Kanigher, and Wonder Woman followed the hundreds of thousands of American women workers who, when peace came, were told that their labor threatened the stability of the nation. Kanigher made Wonder Woman a babysitter, a fashion model, and a movie star. She gave advice to the lovelorn, as the author of a lonely-hearts newspaper advice column. Her new writer also abandoned a regular feature, “The Wonder Women of History”—a four-page centerfold in every issue, containing a biography of a woman of achievement. He replaced it with a series about weddings, called “Marriage à la Mode.”

“You, Daughter, must become the women’s leader,” the Duke of Deception tells Lya, in a Wonder Woman story written by Kanigher. “You must persuade them that they don’t want any political rights and that everything I dictate they vote for.” Lya smiles, and says, “That’ll be easy!”

In the nineteen-fifties, women went home. Women’s rights went underground. And homosexuals were persecuted. Is there a “quick test like an X-ray that discloses these things?” U.S. Senator Margaret Chase Smith asked in hearings about homosexuality in 1950. At the State Department, a former F.B.I. officer was put in charge of purging the civil service of homosexuals by administering lie-detector tests, based on Marston’s research. Those who failed were required to resign. Between 1945 and 1956, a thousand accused homosexuals employed by the State Department and five thousand employed by the federal government lost their jobs. Marston, Holloway, and Byrne had led a closeted life. It had its costs.

In 1948, Holloway went back to her job at Metropolitan Life. Byrne found another kind of employment. “I am working for our local ‘Maternal Health Center’ clinic,” she wrote to Margaret Sanger, “and am most amused when they speak of you. Somehow they think you

are a contemporary of Florence Nightingale.” It was as if Sanger had lived in another century. Byrne tried to explain to people at the clinic that Sanger was alive and well, but she never told anyone that she was Sanger’s niece.

FEBRUARY 4, 2008
“There’s your problem.”

In the nineteen-fifties, Sanger turned her attention to the question of how she would be remembered. She’d been sorting through her papers, preparing them for the Library of Congress and for Smith College, deciding which papers to keep, and which to throw



away. In 1951, at the age of seventy-two, Sanger sold the rights to a film based on her autobiography. She then wrote a letter to Ethel Byrne, claiming that the scriptwriter wished to make a slight alteration to the facts of the founding of the birth-control movement, regarding the trials the two women had faced in 1917. In the film, Sanger told her sister, “I should be the Hunger Strikee.” Ethel Byrne would not be mentioned. Sanger asked her sister to sign a release stating that she agreed that the film would not “portray me or any part of my life” and that, in the film, it would appear “that Mrs. Sanger engaged in the famous hunger strike instead of myself.” Ethel Byrne thought the release was “the funniest thing in the world,” according to Olive. She never signed it. The film was never made.

In much the same way that Sanger wished she could erase from the historical record the fact that Ethel Byrne, and not she, had gone on a hunger strike, she also wanted to keep well hidden her ties to the comic-book superhero created by William Moulton Marston. Maybe she found the association embarrassing or thought it was unimportant. But, more likely, never mentioning it was among the things that Sanger did to help keep Olive Byrne’s family arrangements secret, in order to avoid scandal for Olive and the

children, and harm to Sanger's cause. Whatever the reason, in no part of the story of Sanger's life, as she told it, did she ever mention Wonder Woman.

Holloway and Byrne lived together for the rest of their lives. In the fifties and sixties, they often stayed in Tucson, taking care of Sanger. Byrne worked as Sanger's secretary. In 1961, Byrne's son Donn married one of Sanger's granddaughters; she became Margaret Sanger Marston. In 1965, when the Supreme Court effectively legalized contraception, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, Byrne wrote to Justice William O. Douglas, who had written the opinion for the 7-2 majority, "I am sure Mrs. Sanger, who is very ill, would rejoice in this pronouncement which crowns her 50 years of dedication to the liberation of women." Sanger died the next year.

In 1972, the editors of *Ms.* put Wonder Woman on the cover of the first regular issue, bridging the distance between the feminism of the nineteen-tens and the feminism of the nineteen-seventies with the Wonder Woman of the nineteen-forties, the feminism of their childhoods. "Looking back now at these Wonder Woman stories from the '40s," Gloria Steinem wrote, "I am amazed by the strength of their feminist message."

Ms. was meant to be an organ for a revived feminist movement, begun in 1963 with the publication of Betty Friedan's "Feminine Mystique" and the passage of the Equal Pay Act. The National Organization for Women was founded in 1966. In 1969, Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone started the Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement. Firestone's manifesto, "The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution," was published the next year, along with Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics" and Robin Morgan's "Sisterhood Is Powerful." A revolution was being waged, too, in the world of magazines. In March, 1970, forty-six women working at *Newsweek* sued the magazine for discrimination. At the *Ladies' Home Journal*,

more than a hundred women staged an eleven-hour sit-in; their demands included day care, a female senior editorial staff, and a special issue of the magazine to be called *The Women's Liberated Journal*.

The revolution also came to comics. In July, 1970, the Women's Liberation Basement Press, in Berkeley, launched an underground comic book called "It Aint Me Babe." Its first issue featured Wonder Woman on its cover marching in a parade with female comic characters, protesting stock plots. In a story called "Breaking Out," Veronica ditches Archie for Betty, Supergirl tells Superman to get lost, Petunia Pig tells Porky Pig to cook his own dinner, and, when Iggy tells Lulu she can't be in his parade ("No girls allowed!"), she walks away, saying, "Fuck this shit!"

A nationwide Women's Strike for Equality was held on August 26, 1970, the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Joanne Edgar helped organize the work stoppage at Facts on File. Patricia Carbine went on strike at *Look*. A year later, Edgar became a founding editor of *Ms.*, Carbine its publisher.

"Hello, I'm Elizabeth Marston and I know all about Wonder Woman," Holloway said when she walked into the offices of *Ms.*, in the spring of 1972. She was nearly eighty, as pale as paper and as thin as bone. In Virginia, where she was living with Olive Byrne, who was sixty-eight, she'd got a letter from Joanne Edgar, telling her that *Ms.* was planning to run a cover story about Wonder Woman. Holloway flew to New York. She met the magazine's writers and editors and artists. "All were on the young side, very much in earnest," she reported to Marjorie Wilkes Huntley. "I told them I was 100% with them in what they are trying to do and to 'charge ahead!'" Huntley sent in a money order for a subscription, signing herself, at the age of eighty-two, "Marjorie Wilkes Huntley (Ms.)."

But Holloway never told Edgar, or anyone else, about Olive Byrne. In 1974, when a Berkeley Ph.D. student writing a dissertation about Wonder Woman asked Holloway about Wonder Woman's bracelets, Holloway replied in a letter, "A student of Dr. Marston's wore on each wrist heavy, broad silver bracelets, one African and the other Mexican. They attracted his attention as symbols of love binding so that he adopted them for the Wonder Woman strip." The bracelets were Olive Byrne's. Olive Byrne had at that point been living with Holloway for forty-eight years.

At the beginning of 1972, when the editors of *Ms.* were planning their Wonder Woman issue, the women's movement seemed on the verge of lasting success. On March 22, 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment passed the Senate, nearly a half century after it had been introduced. In June, Congress also passed Title IX, assuring that "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." The year 1972 was a legislative watershed. "We put sex-discrimination provisions into everything," Bella Abzug said. "There was no opposition. Who'd be against equal rights for women?"

OCTOBER 17, 2005

"A.T. & T. sent this drink over in hopes you'll consider switching your long-distance provider."

A lot of people. In 1972, Wonder Woman was named a "Symbol of Feminist Revolt"; the next year, the Supreme Court legalized abortion. But the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* didn't bolster the feminist movement; it narrowed it. If 1972 was a legislative watershed, 1973 marked the beginning of a drought. The movement stalled. Wages never reached parity; social and economic gains were rolled back; political and legal victories seemingly within



sight were never achieved. Then, too, the movement was divided, bitterly and viciously, radicals attacking liberals and liberals attacking radicals. In May, 1975, the Redstockings held a press conference and issued a sixteen-page report purporting to reveal that Gloria Steinem was a C.I.A. agent, that *Ms.* was both a capitalist manifesto and part of a C.I.A. strategy to destroy the women's movement, and that Wonder Woman was a symbol of nothing so much as feminism betrayed. "Wonder Woman also reflects the anti-people attitude of the 'liberal feminists' and matriarchists who look to mythical and supernatural heroines and 'models' while ignoring or denigrating the achievements and struggles of down-to-earth women," they charged. "It leads to the 'liberated woman,' individualist line that denies the need for a movement, and implies that when women don't make it, it's their own fault." Steinem rebutted the allegations. "Although it seems bizarre to have to write this obvious sentence," she wrote, "let me state that I am not now nor have I ever been an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency."

Wonder Woman ran for President in a comic book written by Marston in 1943; she ran for President on the cover of *Ms.* in 1972. She'll run again; she's never won. The Equal Rights Amendment never became law; in 1982, the deadline for its ratification expired. A century after Sanger started *The Woman Rebel*, even the fight for birth control isn't over.

Last March, I went to see "Captain America: The Winter Soldier," with Byrne Holloway Marston. He's named for all three of his parents. He's eighty-three. He's a retired obstetrician. He's also a movie buff. He's optimistic about Gal Gadot, though he thinks that Jennifer Lawrence would have made a tip-top Wonder Woman. "She's good enough to soften it up," he says.

Captain America and Wonder Woman are about the same age. He made his debut in 1940. They've aged differently, the Boy Scout and the bombshell. Captain America is so hard to update that Marvel decided to have him frozen in 1945 and awakened in 2011. A guy he meets while out for a run on the Washington Mall asks him what's different about now versus 1945. "No polio is good," he says.

Warner Bros. is unlikely to release a film in which Wonder Woman is frozen in time in 1941, in order to call attention to what's changed for women, and what's not, when she's defrosted. She'd have to take stock, and what could she say about what women have got? Breast pumps and fetal rights instead of paid maternity leave and equal rights? Longer hours instead of equal pay? Aphrodite, aid me! Lean in? Are you *kidding*? Batman vs. Superman? Suffering Sappho.

Sitting in the dark, I asked Byrne Marston what he thought he would do if he were writing Wonder Woman into the script for "Dawn of Justice."

"God, I don't know," he said. He stretched out his legs. "I'd go back to the origins." ♦



Jill Lepore, a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2005.

RELATED STORIES



AMERICAN CHRONICLES

MARGARET SANGER AND PLANNED PARENTHOOD

BY JILL LEPORE



CULTURE DESK

SUPERMAN THROUGH THE AGES

BY SKY DYLAN-ROBBINS
