

"Great Hera!" "Suffering Sappho!": The Secret History of Wonder Woman

In 1937, William Moulton Marston, Harvard-trained psychologist, inventor of the lie detector test, and soon-to-be creator of Wonder Woman (first appearing in 1941), earned himself headlines when he declared that women would one day rule the world. In her extraordinary biography of Marston's female alter ego, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, Harvard historian and *New Yorker* staff writer Jill Lepore notes that this prediction was as old as the Amazons. But the time seemed ripe for a feminist resurgence. Two years earlier the lawyer Lillian D. Rock, founder of the League for a Woman President and Vice President announced, "The women of America could convert this country to a matriarchy if they wanted to assert their power," anticipating with absolute certainty that a woman would be elected president of the United States within twenty years.

Just how Wonder Woman, the most popular female superhero of all time, came to be born, Athena-like, it seemed, from Marston's convoluted psyche, is wild and wonderful stuff. Lepore brilliantly delineates how Wonder Woman was, in fact, the collaborative offspring of a dominantly female, if not exactly female dominant, love quadrangle, Marston being the lone male. Lepore's account of this unusual menage reveals an obscure and obscured period of American feminism -- those dark years between the first and second wave when Wonder Woman seemed to be single-handedly keeping the movement alive.

In the fall of 1911, during Marston's freshman year at Harvard, the Harvard Men's League for Woman Suffrage announced they would sponsor a lecture by the social and political reformer Florence Kelley. The trouble was, women were prohibited from speaking at Harvard. After campus protests and a petition, she was finally allowed to speak, but the league's next invited speaker, Emmeline Pankhurst, was barred from campus. The league found her an off-campus venue and it became the most talked about event of the year. "The most ignorant young man, who knows nothing of the needs of women," Pankhurst railed, "thinks himself a competent legislator, because he is a man. This aristocratic attitude is a mistake." Marston's feminist consciousness was ignited. Both his professional and personal life would be profoundly influenced by the women's rights movement and the idea of a feminist utopia.

In 1915, Marston married his childhood sweetheart, Sadie Elizabeth Holloway, graduate of Mount Holyoke, who wore her hair short to imitate Greenwich Village feminists and was intent on having a fulfilling professional life. Holloway enrolled in Boston University's Law School (founded in 1869, it was the first coeducational college in Massachusetts) while Marston pursued a PhD in psychology at Harvard. In 1918, sent by the US Army to Camp Upton to treat soldiers with shell shock, Marston met and began a lifelong relationship with Marjorie Huntley,

the camp librarian, four years his senior, divorced, and a believer in "extra-body consciousness, vibrations, reincarnation, and the psychic nature of orgasm." She was also a proponent of "what she called 'love binding': the importance of being tied and chained."

The romantic tetragon was completed by Olive Byrne, a student of Marston's at Tufts in 1925. Olive was the niece of Margaret Sanger, social activist, leader of the birth control movement, and author of the radically feminist concept: "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body." In 1917, Olive was eleven when her mother Edith Byrne was arrested with Sanger in Brooklyn for showing women how to use pessaries and condoms. Edith Byrne went on a widely publicized hunger strike. Throwing her fate in with those who risked abortion, she said, "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." Sanger, also found guilty, was told by the judge that no woman has "the right to copulate with a feeling of security that there will be no resulting conception." In 1920, Sanger published her best-selling book *Woman and the New Race*, demanding the liberation of the "feminine spirit" and containing, Lepore vividly demonstrates, "the philosophy of Wonder Woman precisely."

Olive Byrne, like her aunt and mother, was a freethinker, radical, and a believer in "free love." By 1926, Byrne, Marston, and Holloway were living together; Marjorie Huntley frequently joined them to participate in "a cult of female sexual power" implementing a theory Marston had been developing on dominance and submission in relations between the sexes.

Four children were born, two each to Holloway and Byrne. The family moved to a rambling farmhouse near New York City; Holloway, pursuing her career as an editor, was the chief breadwinner. Byrne became uber-homemaker while posing as the paid housekeeper. Eventually, she would write articles on child rearing for women's magazines, under a pseudonym. Huntley had her own room, coming and going freely. Marston taught occasionally and wrote articles and books on modern psychology, earning little money. At his fifteenth reunion at Harvard, he said, "Many classmates can testify with me that it is very hard to earn a living; the only thing is to have a wife, like mine, who will go to work to support you." Sexual role reversal or great man syndrome? A case of having his cake and eating it too? Or genuinely struggling with the complicated issue of sex roles?

In a 1931 interview, Marston stated his belief that "the sexes have changed their professional status, that the hunted has become the huntress, that men students have more ideas about women than about themselves, and that a majority of men prefer to be 'unhappy masters' rather than 'happy slaves.'" Marston, Holloway, Byrne, and Huntley seemingly had managed to become content as both masters and slaves in their domestic situation. Like Diana Prince, Wonder Woman's cover, they were, however, lying to the world at large as well as to their children about what exactly those roles were, each of them easily able to fool Marston's infallible lie detector test.

In 1940, Olive Byrne wrote an article about whether comics were bad for children in which she interviewed, as if meeting him for the first time, the expert psychologist William Marston who championed the form. Marston was soon hired by DC Comics as a consulting psychologist. Soon he was making the case to the publisher for a female superhero calling upon, Lepore notes, "more than a century of women's rights rhetoric, his own very odd brand of psychology, and, inevitably, his peerless hucksterism." The publisher loved the idea and Wonder Woman was born.

The new and unique superhero was "as wise as Athena -- with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules." Her thick metal bracelets repulsed bullets, "but if she lets any man weld chains on these bracelets, she loses her power." Wonder Woman was dominance and submission personified. The comic strip regularly symbolized female oppression, as had the women's suffrage movement, by depicting women shackled and dragging balls chained to their feet. When the comic was attacked for its excessive binding and gagging, Marston wrote that, through his creation, he was trying to teach the young to

enjoy submission to kind authority, wise authority, not merely tolerate such submission. Wars will only cease when humans *enjoy being bound*... My whole strip is aimed at drawing the distinction in the minds of children and adults between love bonds and male bonds of cruelty and destruction.

Wonder Woman became the first female superhero to have her own comic book (1942). In the promotional material, Marston wrote the Sanger-esque statement: "The only hope for civilization is the greater freedom, development and equality of women in all fields of human activity." He claimed Wonder Woman "was a form of feminist propaganda" conceived "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."

Lepore's riveting, endlessly astonishing account charts Wonder Woman's remarkable rise and fall from Amazonian defender of justice, tireless crusader of women's rights, and role model for girls and boys as athlete, fighter, tender-hearted nurturer who cultivates her powerful allure to, in the 1950s after Marston had lost control of her, babysitter, fashion model, and movie star who yearns to be a housewife to, in the '70s, a symbol of second wave feminism. Lepore elucidates why this "product of the suffragist, feminist, and birth control movements" has essentially disappeared from our contemporary consciousness.

In 1937, Marston predicted that "in 1,000 years women will definitely rule this country." Although Marston's date seems sadly realistic, perhaps Wonder Woman's resurgence in this wonderful book augurs an abbreviated wait.

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