

Holding Out for a Hero(ine): An Examination of the Presentation and Treatment of Female Superheroes in Marvel Movies

Robyn Joffe

Abstract

Prior to the release of *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), the way that female characters from the Marvel Comics' canon were realized onscreen was problematic for several reasons and encumbered by issues rooted in the strong female character trope and its postfeminist origins. A close examination of three Marvel heroines—Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique—reveals that while they initially appear to be positioned as equal to their male teammates, they are consistently burdened with difficulties and challenges that men never have to face. The filmmakers' focus on these women's appearance and sex appeal, their double standard for violent women, and their perception of a woman's role, create a picture of "strong" women that is questionable at best and damaging at worst.

Keywords: Marvel, postfeminism, sexualization, infantilization, maternalism

Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a media franchise and shared universe, owned by Marvel Studios and currently consists of twenty feature films, seven television series, one digital series, assorted direct-to-video short films, tie-in comic books, and other mixed media products. It is a shared universe that is actively expanding as more and more properties are slated for release. The *X-Men* film series, until recently owned by 20th Century Fox, is one of the interconnecting series of films based on specific characters from Marvel Comics. It currently consists of eleven films and two television series, with more to be released this year. While both of these universes in their entirety are ripe for scholarly attention, this essay will only focus on a selection of the available feature films and their main female characters.

Marvel's female superheroes have thus far been presented as powerful, empowered women and equal to their male counterparts. However, while they appear at first glance to be strong female characters, a closer examination of how they are depicted onscreen, the ways they are made to perceive themselves, and the ways they are characterized by others, reveals that these women are more about style and stereotype than substance. In deconstructing the strong female character trope and its postfeminist origins, I will demonstrate that the filmmakers' focus on these women's appearance and sex appeal, their double standard for violent women, and their

perception of a woman's role, all combine to create a picture of "strong" women that is problematic at best and damaging at worst.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

I will be examining three female superheroes and how their onscreen portrayals conform, to varying degrees, to stereotypes in the filmmakers' efforts to present them as strong female characters. I will do this by using feminist literary criticism to interrogate the postfeminist values that I argue guide these representations. Feminist literary criticism is one avenue of an interdisciplinary mode of enquiry that is based on two main ideas. First, that gender inequality, rather than being based on biology, is a cultural construct that can be broken down and studied. Secondly, the male perspective has been assumed to be universal, which has led it to "dominat[e] fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods."¹

Like any other forms of artistic expression, the crafting of literature and film is paired with ideology—the set of unconscious beliefs and assumptions held by each individual, as well as the practices that inform our everyday lives.² The problem is that ideology can offer a false or limited perception of reality and may reinforce harmful power structures, especially when a book or film's central conceit is that the series of events are happening in a fictional version of the "real" world. In presenting the actions of a specific group or individual, as well as their perception of our world, literature and film do more than merely communicate ideology to their consumers: "since each invocation of a code is also its reinforcement or reinscription, literature [does] more than transmit ideology."³ Like literature, film can also end up creating ideology. Nothing scripted can truly be completely objective and lacking in any kind of agenda—including this essay.

Throughout this paper I will employ qualitative textual analysis. In using this method, I will examine a selection of Marvel characters and films, from both the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the *X-Men* film series. From the official MCU, I will be examining both Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), and Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch). From the *X-Men* film series, I will be examining Raven Darkholme (Mystique).

Postfeminism and the Strong Female Character

Postfeminism can be said to have begun in the early 1990s, in reaction to second-wave feminism and the then burgeoning third-wave feminism. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn suggests that postfeminism did not originate in the academy, but instead originated in "popular discourse of the 1990s to suggest that in the contemporary era, feminism had lost its relevance."⁴ More a "cultural condition" than a movement, postfeminism "generated a second line of feminist inquiry" that moves concurrent to third-wave feminism, overlapping in some areas.⁵

Postfeminism assumes that society is past feminism, glossing over realities of social difference that would problematize that assumption: “white and middle class by default, [postfeminism is] anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self.”⁶

According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism is “a *process* by which popular culture ‘undoes’ feminism while appearing to offer a well-intentioned response to it.”⁷ While postfeminist ideas were “well refuted” by scholars, they were embraced by the mainstream media.⁸ That same media then used those ideas as the base for “sensationalized discussions” about feminism, concluding that the older movement was outdated.⁹ This allowed postfeminist discourse to take hold.¹⁰

Jeffrey A. Brown writes that much of postfeminism is “a marketing ploy or a carefully scripted rhetoric about freedom of choice for women.”¹¹ While there are positive aspects to postfeminism, “it also runs the risk of simply reframing cultural sexism as the woman’s choice.”¹² This is because, in postfeminism, the creation of sexualized images and displays is often characterized as the result of an “active choice” that women have made, rather than as something that has been chosen for them.¹³ Karen Orr Vered and Sal Humphreys warn that “in its disengagement with the structures of patriarchy, it is possible that postfeminism fails to offer any valid strategy for change.”¹⁴ Despite this scholarly consensus, “postfeminism” now “accurately describes how filmmakers, audiences, and the media may conceptualize certain characters and narratives.”¹⁵

One way that mass media has conceptualized postfeminist women can be seen through the emergence of the strong female character. According to Samira Nadkarni, this trope creates a “one-dimensional framework” that prizes physical strength above all, makes attractiveness a requirement, and necessitates the “wearing of skin-tight, skimpy, or fetishistic gear.”¹⁶ She further concludes that the strong female character trope “seemingly offers a symbol of feminism while choosing to undercut values more closely associated with [it].”¹⁷ Strong female characters “risk undermining female strength when the visual focus is as much, or more, on the beauty and desirability of the heroine than on her accomplishments.”¹⁸

Hannah Shaw-Williams, feature editor for *Screen Rant*, has noted that, especially in male-oriented genres, female characters are made to “carry a standard for their entire gender, while male characters get to just be characters.”¹⁹ She further observes that strong female characters aren’t given character arcs wherein they must confront and overcome their own personality flaws, because they are only there to show that women “are just as good as men.”²⁰ Heather M. Porter quotes Shauna Mlawski, who insists that strong female characters are bad for women, precisely for that reason: “Any character without flaws will be a cardboard cutout. Perhaps a sexy cardboard cutout, but two-dimensional nonetheless.”²¹ And Porter specifically references the superhero genre when she writes, “characters need flaws and weaknesses; this helps motivate them ... to achieve something greater.”²²

Case Studies

Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch), and Raven Darkholme (Mystique) are all Marvel Comics characters with intricate and detailed histories in the comic canon. Because Black Widow and Scarlet Witch first appeared in Marvel Comics in 1964, and Mystique first appeared in 1978, the filmmakers had a lot to draw on when creating the backstories and narratives for the film versions of these characters. Black Widow is a Russian spy and a former KGB assassin. After her crimes catch the attention of S.H.I.E.L.D. (a fictional spy agency that deals with the paranormal), an agent is sent to kill her; however, this agent ends up convincing her to defect and join S.H.I.E.L.D. instead. In her first film appearance, which was in *Iron Man 2* (2010), she is sent to spy on and evaluate Tony Stark for S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Avengers Initiative. She then became an Avenger herself in *The Avengers* (2012). Her character has appeared and had a significant role in six of the twenty feature films that have been released so far by Marvel Studios.

A newer addition to the MCU, Scarlet Witch has thus far appeared in three films as well as in the mid-credits scene of a fourth one. After previewing their characters in one of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier's* (2014) final credits scenes, she and her twin brother, Pietro, made their feature film debut in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) as orphans who volunteer to be experimented on by Hydra, a fictional criminal organization that originated in Nazi Germany. These experiments then give both twins superpowers. Scarlet Witch gained facility with “neural electric interfacing, telekinesis, [and] mental manipulation”, and her brother is gifted with super speed.²³ Although both twins eventually switch sides and join the Avengers, Pietro (Quicksilver) is killed in the final battle.

Mystique is a very complicated character. In the initial *X-Men* trilogy, she appears as little more than a sidekick and lover of the villain, Magneto. However, in the more recent *XMFC* trilogy (which, despite being released afterwards, takes place before the initial *X-Men* trilogy), her character is explored more in depth. Mystique is a shapeshifter who can become anyone, but in her natural form she has scaly blue skin, red hair, and yellow eyes. As a child she runs from parents who are fearful of her and finds a place to stay with a young Charles Xavier, a telepath who would become Professor X, leader of the X-Men. Although in the beginning she hides her true form behind blonde hair and blue eyes, she learns to embrace her natural appearance with the help of Erik Lehnsherr, the man who would eventually become Magneto. Because of this connection with Erik, she leaves Professor X and joins Magneto's Brotherhood.

All three of these characters, as well as the narratives of the films, are driven by postfeminist beliefs. According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism “seems to embrace feminism while at the same time viewing the movement as so outdated that it has become oppressive itself.”²⁴ Nowhere is this more apropos than when examining how two of these women are sexualized onscreen.

The Avengers begins with scenes that establish the impending central conflict of the film, and that introduce each of the superheroes who will end up as part of the team: Captain America is in a gym, beating a punching bag so hard that it flies across the room; Bruce Banner, who can turn into the Hulk, is in India, treating the sick; Iron Man is finalizing the installation of his latest technological creation; Black Widow is in a warehouse, tied to a chair.

Because she is a strong female character, Black Widow manages to turn the tables on her would-be torturers, manipulating their interrogation of her to get the information she needs from them, before fighting them all—and winning—despite starting the fight while still tied to the chair. Although this helps to establish her character as a force to be reckoned with, she is still the only character introduced through perceived victimization and fetishistic imagery. That this type of introduction could exist in a supposedly “family friendly” film points to just how pervasive the objectification of women is in our society.²⁵

Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze establishes that mainstream Hollywood movies appeal to audiences because of their “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” and left unchallenged, film “coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.”²⁶ Visual pleasure, Mulvey claims, has been divided into two categories, with men as active participants and women as passive witnesses to their own objectification: “In their traditionalist exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”²⁷

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the camera certainly enjoys looking at Black Widow. There is one particular camera shot that is present in almost every movie she is in: a close-up framing of her backside. In *Iron Man 2* and *Age of Ultron*, they are lingering shots as the camera follows her as she walks across a room. In *The Winter Soldier*, it is the final shot of a fight scene, as she drops her improvised weapon and struts out of the room. In all three cases, it is an unnecessary excuse to put her body on display so that she may fulfill her function as, as Mulvey called it, the “erotic object” for the camera,²⁸ as well as for anyone watching, both on and off screen.

While the camera is admittedly not as intent on Mystique’s body as it is on Black Widow, it does not have to be. The camera does not have to go to the trouble of highlighting a woman’s curves when the woman in question is not wearing any clothes: “Both actresses who played the character [in the two trilogies] were nude but for a few strategically placed scaly prosthetics.”²⁹ This decision was made despite the fact that it did not originate from the Mystique in the comics, only the film version regularly appears undressed. According to Gordon Smith, the first film’s special makeup designer, director Bryan Singer “slam[med] his fist down on the table screaming, ‘I want her nude! I want her nude! I want her nude!’”³⁰ Carolyn Cocca speculates that Singer was looking to place Mystique in contrast to the X-Men, who are dressed in plain, simple black

leather (albeit skin-tight leather) uniforms; however, his doing so “cannot but position her as an object ... something to look at, instead of someone to root for or identify with.”³¹

Gladys Knight writes that “[Post]feminists ... tend to equate sexual power with physical power and believe that women who are beautiful and draw the male gaze can be coded as powerful.”³² Critics like Ariel Levy, however, reject this idea, “insisting that what some are calling ‘the new feminism’ is really ‘the old objectification’, disguised in stilettos,” and blame postfeminists for “co-opting the ideals of sex radicalism and feminism by equating sexually provocative behaviour with freedom.”³³ However, the question of whether or not women can be empowered by displaying themselves sexually onscreen is a moot point: their agency is surrendered once they become an object of the male gaze.³⁴ After all, it is exceedingly unlikely that the “dominating patriarchal gaze” views the resulting sexualized images onscreen as evidence of a woman’s strength and power.³⁵

Scarlet Witch is perhaps a unique character in consideration of this: she has not been ogled by or put on display for the camera. However, her situation introduces another way in which women’s looks are policed by media and society. During the publicity tour for *Age of Ultron*, Elizabeth Olsen, who plays Scarlet Witch, spoke about acting in slow motion while demonstrating for her audience: “Usually facial expressions aren’t great in slo-mo, because sometimes we’ll do super slo-mo moves, and, you know, you’re trying to do effort... But what I did just then, in slo-mo, is quite literally the most unattractive thing you could ever see anyone do. It’s so weird. And [director] Joss [Whedon] would always remind me to use a calm face because that is okay to watch.”³⁶

Whedon complained that there is a “genuine, recalcitrant, intractable sexism, and old-fashioned quiet misogyny that goes on” in Hollywood.³⁷ But even though he speaks out about it, his actions only help to perpetuate the cycle: none of the male actors have reported being told to make a “calm face” during fight scenes. Moreover, this treatment is not the only thing that separates Scarlet Witch from the other characters. While Black Widow and Mystique are objectified by those behind the scenes, Scarlet Witch is diminished in a different way. A consequence of conflating power with desirability is that a character that is not sexualized can instead be seen as vulnerable—even when she is meant to be strong.

In *Age of Ultron*, Scarlet Witch single-handedly paralyzes the Avengers by going into each of their minds and causing them to experience detailed and traumatic hallucinations. She later stops a speeding train and instigates a city-wide evacuation with her magic. Her abilities are extremely versatile and—although she struggles with them at times—there have been no hard limits established regarding what she can do. She is currently demonstrably the most powerful superhero in the MCU, and yet she is the only one who panics in the midst of a climactic battle. She cowers in an abandoned building until Hawkeye, a straight, white male character with no actual superpowers, gives her a pep-talk:

Are you up for this? ... We're fighting an army of robots, and I have a bow and arrow. None of this makes sense. But I'm going back out there because it's my job, okay? And I can't do my job and babysit. It doesn't matter what you did, or what you were. If you go out there, you fight, and you fight to kill. [If you] stay in here, you're good; I'll send your brother to come find you. But if you step out that door... You are an Avenger.³⁸

As Hawkeye is revealed to be a father of three in this film, there is a paternal quality to this speech that, along with the words and images used, emphasize the idea of Scarlet Witch as a frightened child. Adding legitimacy to this idea, she is motivated rather than angered by his words, and emerged dramatically from the abandoned building to fight alongside the others. Although Whedon has built a reputation for presenting strong and empowered women onscreen, a closer examination of the type of female character he most often creates reveals a very different reality.

Sarah Hagelin writes that “our culture ... remains troublingly invested in [stories] of female fragility.”³⁹ Whedon is more than willing to provide those stories. The projects for which he is most well-known each feature at least one character that plays on the “hysterical woman” trope. Frail, slender, and emotional, these women are either extremely intelligent or exceedingly powerful. They are also constantly overwhelmed by their intelligence or power, appear unbalanced, and are seen as being in need of protection.⁴⁰ Throughout *Age of Ultron*, Scarlet Witch is shown as being dependent on her brother for comfort, protection, and emotional stability: “[Scarlet Witch] has such a vast amount of [power] that she's unable to learn how to control it. No one taught her how to control it properly. So it gets the best of her. It's not that she's mentally insane, it's just that she's just overly stimulated.”⁴¹

Whedon calls himself a feminist, but presenting powerful women is only progressive if those women already have or gain the control and confidence to handle their power. Whedon's presentations of female strength tend to weaken upon closer examination. It cannot be a coincidence that the two female Avengers in *Age of Ultron* are the only ones who are carried from the final battlefield by male characters despite the fact that both are conscious and that Scarlet Witch's powers allow her to fly. All of the surviving male Avengers, in contrast, leave under their own power.

Whedon is not the only director who considers Scarlet Witch in need of rescue: *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) directors, Anthony and Joe Russo, appear to feel the same way. This shared view of her character is indicative of the way she has been infantilized by those around her—both in front of and behind the camera. Despite her immense power, this infantilization implies that she is powerless where it matters. In *Civil War*, after her brother's death at the end of *Age of Ultron*, the male Avengers have taken his place as her protectors. Throughout the film they consistently treat her like a child, absolving her of any and all guilt and responsibility for her actions, even when her actions result in the deaths of

innocent bystanders. Despite her role as an Avenger, the power she possesses, and the fact that Olsen was twenty-eight years old when the film came out, in comparison with the male Avengers, Scarlet Witch is “just a kid.”⁴²

Avengers: Infinity War only continues this trend. Even though her extreme power level is finally acknowledged within the narrative, Scarlet Witch still needs to be rescued when she and Vision are attacked towards the beginning of the story. In the directors’ commentary, Joe Russo states that the filmmakers arranged for events to unfold in this way specifically because they wanted to give Captain America a “great entrance” into the film.⁴³ Even though Scarlet Witch should be more than a match for her foes, she is instead overwhelmed by the battle solely so that Captain America can save her. Unfortunately, she is not the only female superhero who is treated like a child and otherwise diminished by the men in her life.

X-Men: Days of Future Past (2014) starts in a dystopian near-future, in the midst of genocide caused by the murderous Sentinels. In order to save the world, a group of surviving mutants decide to send one of them, Wolverine, back to 1973 to stop the first incidence in the chain of events that would lead to that future. That event was Mystique’s assassination of Bolivar Trask, creator of the Sentinels. Trask had been conducting secret and lethal experiments on mutants, but his death at the hands of a mutant only convinces the government that mutants are dangerous and Sentinels are necessary. His death is also the first time that Mystique kills, or as Professor X declares, “The day she truly became *Mystique*.”⁴⁴

This idea that the act of killing is a line from which, once crossed, there could be no return, reveals one of the many flaws in this film’s narrative. The men that Wolverine gathers to stop Mystique—including the younger version of Professor X (Charles)—are all of the same mind: Mystique must not kill. In an early scene in 1973, Mystique stops a group of Trask’s security contractors from taking mutant soldiers, including her friend Alex, into custody in Vietnam. When one tries to stop her, she starts to strangle him, and it appears as though she is not going to stop. Alex then takes it upon himself to use his power to blast the man that she is strangling across the room, presumably saving the man’s life. Mystique is not amused by Alex’s intervention:

MYSTIQUE: “I had that.”

ALEX: “I know.”⁴⁵

Judith Lorber writes, “In the social construction of gender, it does not matter what men and women actually do or even if they do the same thing. The social institution insists only that what they do is perceived as different.”⁴⁶ In *X-Men: First Class* (2011), Erik walks into a bar filled with former Nazi soldiers, has a drink, and proceeds to kill them all. He shows no remorse and no mercy, and yet, later in the film, Charles still tells him that he is capable of goodness and redemption. Mystique, however, must be saved from herself. While it is understandable that the men want to stop Mystique from killing Trask in order to prevent the horrible future, the episode

with Alex implies that any death she causes will place her irrevocably on the side of evil. This plays into the idea that the existence of a female villain is more disturbing than that of a male villain, because aggressive and violent women are “unnatural.”⁴⁷

Paula Ruth Gilbert writes, “according to our rigid gender polarity ... violent women are seen neither as sane nor as women. Society needs to see violent women as different—either mad or bad—because otherwise, we would need new discourses to understand that both men and women can be violent.”⁴⁸ Mystique’s plan to kill Trask is both cold and calculated—as much an execution as an assassination—because while she is motivated, in part, by revenge, she is not driven by that desire; it does not control her. She is impassive and unyielding, even when Charles confronts her:

CHARLES: “If you kill Trask you’ll be creating countless others just like him.”

MYSTIQUE: “Then I’ll kill them, too.”

CHARLES: “Those are Erik’s words, not yours.”⁴⁹

Charles’ response to her declaration is telling. Her words must be Erik’s, because the idea that *he* is a merciless killer is culturally acceptable, whereas the ruthlessness and premeditation found within Mystique’s words could not possibly belong to a woman: “The fact that social tolerance for aggression is gendered reflects the cultural equation of violence and masculinity.”⁵⁰

In this way, Mystique refuses both the traditional characterization of a female villain—a slave to her emotions, jealous, or insane⁵¹—and of a postfeminist femme fatale, who wields her sexuality like a weapon.⁵² The truth is that Mystique is oddly positioned in this film. A heroic villain, she is on a crusade to stop a murderer, but her actions will result in a holocaust. The problem with Mystique, a three-dimensional and imperfect character, in *Days of Future Past* is not Mystique herself, but the way she is treated and viewed by the male characters and the overall narrative: “[Mystique is] positioned in the middle of a feud between Erik Lehnsherr and Charles Xavier. Both of these men try to secure her affection and loyalty to their ideologies, and both treat her as a much younger and immature character ... [and] mostly talk about her as if she is a mere object.”⁵³ An early exchange between the two men, referencing Mystique, makes this obvious:

CHARLES: “You took the things that meant the most to me.”

ERIK: “Maybe you should have fought harder for them.”⁵⁴

In the end, Charles refuses to use his powers to control Mystique, leaving her to decide whether or not to kill Trask. While this, in and of itself, may be a triumph, one cannot ignore that she is only able to make her choice because Charles *allows* it. As Jason Zeigshiem observes, “In the X-Men filmic universe, women who embrace their powers and exert their agency risk annihilating the world. It is only white men who possess the authority to wield their own powers as they see fit.”⁵⁵ The plot may hinge on Mystique, but the narrative focuses entirely on the fact

that she is wrong and the men must correct her: “Her role is central, but at the same time carries forth the historical underrepresentation and stereotyping of female characters.”⁵⁶

Mystique is not the only female superhero whose more recent characterizations carry forth sexist stereotypes while ignoring underrepresented realities and relying on postfeminist ideas of normative femininity. Black Widow’s role in *Age of Ultron* and its director’s emphasis on maternalism exemplify these issues. According to Diane Negra, postfeminism “withdraws from the contemplation of structural inequities fostered by feminism, putting forward diagnostics of femininity that take the place of analyses of political or economic culture. It achieves this, in part, by relentlessly stressing matrimonial and maternalist models of female subjectivity.”⁵⁷

Maternalism “is the notion that femaleness is rooted in motherly qualities so that women must become mothers in order to realize themselves.”⁵⁸ Rooted in the origins of feminism, maternalist thinking promotes the idea that maternity equals morality and that the maternal instinct is present in all women, ensuring their good moral character.⁵⁹ The “new momism,” a slightly reimagined idea of maternalism, “has become the central justifying ideology of what has come to be called ‘postfeminism’.”⁶⁰ As with many ideas related to postfeminism, the new momism emphasizes the freedom of choice:

Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here’s where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves ... that you are a ‘real’ woman, and ... a decent, worthy one, is to become a ‘mom’ ... Thus the new momism is deeply contradictory: It both draws from and repudiates feminism.⁶¹

The new momism is the driving force behind Black Widow’s storyline in *Age of Ultron*.

Midway through *Age of Ultron* there is a scene featuring Black Widow and Bruce Banner wherein they discuss a potential romantic relationship. Banner demurs, bringing up the fact that he cannot always control when he turns into the Hulk. He says that there is no future for Black Widow with a monster like him. In return, Black Widow reveals part of her history: “In the Red Room, where I was trained, where I was raised... they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It’s efficient. One less thing to worry about; the one thing that might matter more than a mission. It makes everything easier, even killing. You still think you’re the only monster on the team?”⁶²

This speech generated significant reaction from fans, as they accused Whedon, who also wrote the script, of suggesting that Black Widow’s inability to conceive made her a monster. Although Black Widow does not explicitly say that her sterility makes her a monster, she does say that it is the reason she was such a good assassin. If her status as a killer is what makes her a monster and her sterility is why she was a good killer, then her words do imply a connection between childlessness and monstrosity. This unfortunate situation is only compounded by the

fact that just prior to this scene in the film, the Avengers are introduced to Hawkeye's very pregnant wife, Laura, whose happiness at her current and impending motherhood become another source of angst for Black Widow.

A year after the film's release, Whedon finally addressed the scene between Black Widow and Banner and that section of dialogue in particular, so as to explain what he had been trying to accomplish. In an interview on the *Tumblr* website, Whedon wrote: "[Black Widow] said she was a monster because she was an assassin ... Being rendered infertile made her feel unnatural, made her feel cut off from the natural world. But it was her actions that defined her."⁶³

Rosalind Petchesky argues, "at the foundation of all patriarchal ideology is the idea that 'Motherhood ... is the primary purpose of a woman's life'."⁶⁴ Mardy Ireland is more specific in her critique that "there is an implicit assumption that motherhood is intrinsic to adult female identity. This assumption necessarily implies an 'absence' for any woman who is then not a mother."⁶⁵ Whedon's response does nothing to pacify the complaints that many raised when the movie came out. That he thought this explanation would appease those concerned only highlights how the new momism has helped to skew the conversation disproportionately in favour of maternalist rhetoric. The other side of the argument—that the many happy and successful women who are not mothers help to prove that motherhood "is more of a culturally embedded mandate" than a biological imperative⁶⁶—is rarely, if ever, heard in popular media.

Conclusion

Alexandra Petri writes, "fiction matters. You don't have the luxury of getting to know most people. But fictional characters you can learn inside and out. ... you get glimpses of their interiors that most people, even the people you're closest to, never afford you. You internalize them and make them a part of yourself."⁶⁷ Each of these characters and the issues mentioned here, individually, may not stand out as significant problems in need of solutions. However, when looked at with the knowledge that up until recently, these portrayals were representative of all female superheroes onscreen, the destructive patterns and practices of these filmmakers require a response.

Representation is important, but quality of representation also matters.⁶⁸ Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique are all women who have been put onscreen by men, which may be part of the problem. Simone de Beauvoir writes, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."⁶⁹ Although they are fictional, these representations matter because they help to construct new ideas of female identity—the acceptance of which can then lead to changed behaviours.⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that men are incapable of creating complex and imperfect female characters, but to do so requires more than good intentions.

Action must be taken, even if the first step may seem counterproductive. In other words, the strong female character, with its shallow ideas of strength and its overreliance on a single personality type, must disappear: “these postfeminist action heroes provide images of an equality that has not been achieved and [they] mitigate their viewers’ interests in exploring inequalities.”⁷¹ This will require a shift away from postfeminism, and the emphasis on style over substance that reduced the feminist movement to “mere slogans of token empowerment.”⁷² It is not that female superheroes cannot be sexy or have childlike personality quirks but this cannot be all that they are; and, there must be variety that extends beyond superficial appearance.

Tania Modleski warns that the postfeminist move from “womencentered, feminist approaches to gender studies is allowing patriarchy to both appropriate and contain feminism for masculinist ends.”⁷³ After all, postfeminism does nothing to alter the patriarchal status quo. The challenge now is to move beyond surface measures and create actual, substantive change. Although this may require drastic changes in attitudes in those who work behind the scenes, there is no reason why it cannot be done. If our culture can accept that superheroes exist in fictionalized versions of “our” reality as complex, flawed, and noble human beings, there is no reason it cannot accept that some of them are women.

Notes

¹ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, “Feminist Scholarship and the Social Construction of Woman,” in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

² Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 162.

³ Greene and Kahn, “Feminist Scholarship,” 3.

⁴ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 26.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

⁷ Angela McRobbie, quoted in Karlyn, *Unruly Girls*, 27.

⁸ Karlyn, *Unruly Girls*, 27.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jeffrey A. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 11.

¹² Ibid., 170.

¹³ Lisa Purse, “Return of the ‘Angry Woman’: Authenticating Female Physical Action in Contemporary Cinema,” in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, eds. M. Waters and Stacy Gillis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 188.

¹⁴ Karen Orr Vered and Sal Humphreys, “Postfeminist Inflections in Television Studies,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 156.

¹⁵ Linda Mizejewski, “In Focus: Dressed to Kill: Postfeminist Noir,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 122.

- ¹⁶ Samira Nadkarni, "Front and Center: Examining Black Widow Fanvids," in *Marvel's Black Widow from Spy to Superhero: Essays on an Avenger with a Very Specific Skill Set*, ed. Sherry Ginn (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017), 47.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹⁸ Brown, *Beyond Bombshells*, 171.
- ¹⁹ Hannah Shaw-Williams, "Stop Calling 'Agent Carter' a Feminist Triumph," *ScreenRant*, January 7, 2015, <https://screenrant.com/agent-carter-feminism-female-superheroes-discussion/>.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Shauna Mlawski, quoted in Heather M. Porter, "In Search of the Complete Female Character in Marvel's Cinematic Universe," in *Marvel's Black Widow from Spy to Superhero: Essays on an Avenger with a Very Specific Skill Set*, ed. Sherry Ginn (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017), 27.
- ²² Porter, "In Search of the Complete Female Character," 27.
- ²³ *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, directed by Joss Whedon (Burbank: Marvel Studios, 2015), DVD.
- ²⁴ Angela McRobbie, quoted in Karlyn, *Unruly Girls*, 27.
- ²⁵ Brown, *Beyond Bombshells*, 31.
- ²⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 268.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Carolynocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 150.
- ³⁰ Gordon Smith, quoted in Cocca, *Superwomen*, 150.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Gladys L. Knight, *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), 64.
- ³³ Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 103.
- ³⁴ Katherine Farrimond, "Bad Girls in Crisis: The New Teenage Femme Fatale," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 79-80.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³⁶ Elizabeth Olsen, quoted in Anne Mavity, *Elizabeth Olsen and Aaron Taylor-Johnson Interview - Avengers: Age of Ultron*, YouTube, 36:11, May 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN1XaojMuCY>.
- ³⁷ Joss Whedon, quoted in Nadkarni, "Front and Center," 40.
- ³⁸ *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).
- ³⁹ Sarah Hagelin, *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Pain, and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 3.
- ⁴⁰ Jes Battis, "Captain Tightpants: Firefly and the Science Fiction Canon," *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies* 7, no. 1 (2008); S.E. Smith, "Disability on Angel: Winifred Burkle and the Hot Mess," *This Ain't Livin': Stillness is a Lie, My Dear* blogpost, July 11, 2010, http://meloukhia.net/2010/07/disability_on_angel_winifred_burkle_and_the_hot_mess/.
- ⁴¹ Elizabeth Olsen, quoted in Anthony Breznican, "Scarlet Witch: Elizabeth Olsen on the Secrets of Super-Twins in Age of Ultron," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 29, 2015, <https://ew.com/article/2015/04/29/scarlet-witch-elizabeth-olsen/>.
- ⁴² *Captain America: Civil War*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Burbank: Marvel Studios, 2016), DVD.
- ⁴³ "Commentary," *Avengers: Infinity War*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Burbank: Marvel Studios, 2018), Blu-ray.
- ⁴⁴ *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, directed by Bryan Singer (Century City: 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 26.

- ⁴⁷ Shannon Austin, "Batman's Female Foes: The Gender War in Gotham City," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 2 (2015): 286.
- ⁴⁸ Paula Ruth Gilbert, "Discourses of Female Violence and Societal Gender Stereotypes," *Violence Against Women* 8, no. 11 (2002): 1282.
- ⁴⁹ *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014).
- ⁵⁰ Laura Grindstaff and Martha McCaughey, "Re-membering John Bobbitt: Castration Anxiety, Male Hysteria, and the Phallus," in *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence*, eds. Alice Myers and Sarah Wight (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1996), 150.
- ⁵¹ Sarah Champion and Lénora Lardy, "Conference Report: Women Who Kill in English-Speaking Cinema and TV Series of the Postfeminist Era," *Miranda* 14 (2017): 1; Katherine Marie Kapurch, "Unconditionally and at the Heart's Core: Twilight, Neo-Victorian Melodrama, and Popular Girl Culture," Dissertation (University of Texas, 2012), 269.
- ⁵² Farrimond, "Bad Girls in Crisis," 80.
- ⁵³ Carolyn Cocca, "Containing the X-Women: De-powering and De-queering Female Characters," in *The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis*, ed. Claudia Bucciferro (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 86.
- ⁵⁴ *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014).
- ⁵⁵ Jason Zingsheim, "Shape-Shifting Identity: Mystique's Embodied Agency," in *The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis*, ed. Claudia Bucciferro (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 102.
- ⁵⁶ Cocca, "Containing the X-Women," 86.
- ⁵⁷ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.
- ⁵⁸ Carolyn M. Morell, *Unwomanly Conduct: The Challenges of Intentional Childlessness* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁶⁰ Susan Jeanne Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 24.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁶² *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).
- ⁶³ Joss Whedon, quoted in William Hughes, "Joss Whedon Finally Explains Black Widow's 'Monster' Line From *Age of Ultron*." AV Club, last modified November 8, 2016, <https://news.avclub.com/joss-whedon-finally-explains-black-widow-s-monster-li-1798254111>.
- ⁶⁴ Rosalind Petchesky, quoted in Morell, *Unwomanly Conduct*, 169n3.
- ⁶⁵ Mardy S. Ireland, *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 1.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁶⁷ Alexandra Petri, quoted in Porter, "In Search of the Complete," 34.
- ⁶⁸ Although outside the scope of this paper, race is also an incredibly important factor to consider when evaluating the quality of onscreen representations. For a discussion on Marvel's recent characterizations of women of colour, please see: Carol Azungi Dralega, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Hegemonic Femininity in Black Panther," *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 10, no. 3 (2018): 462-65.
- ⁶⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, quoted in Sue Thornham, "Feminism and Film," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 2006), 75.
- ⁷⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 237.
- ⁷¹ Cristina Lucia Stasia, "'My Guns Are in the Fendi!': The Postfeminist Female Action Hero," in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration (Expanded Second Edition)*, eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 247.

⁷² Brown, *Beyond Bombshells*, 171.

⁷³ Tania Modleski, quoted in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 2006), 253.