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## “It Wasn’t Made For Him” Examining Female-Led Superhero Films Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel and the Internet Commentary That Follows

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# “It Wasn’t Made for Him”: Examining Female-Led Superhero Films *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* and the Internet Commentary That Follows

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## **Abstract**

Recently, there has been a public push for the film industry to improve female representation; subsequently, DC and Marvel released *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* to both critical praise and record box office figures. Strictly looking at industry measures of success (critics’ reviews and box office totals), it would appear that the industry and public are demanding more films with similar female representation. However, public opinion cannot be captured by critical interpretation and viewership alone; it is important to understand both how audiences feel after viewing a film and which aspects resonated with them. I aimed to study a portion of the discourse being spread about these films on the internet to uncover an untold aspect of their public reception. I read and coded meaningful sentiments from the first 250 IMDb user reviews for each film to evaluate audiences’ perspectives on themes. The review’s sentiments speak to changes within the gender culture of the film industry as well as the viability of these films in the future. I found that reviewers primarily took issue with the films’ portrayal of feminism as well as the actresses’ actions both outside of the film and within. Incidentally, I also found that reviewers took issue with aspects not related to the films’ content including the moderation of review platforms and how the films compared to previous installments within their respective universes. In general, I found that the user critics on IMDb were much less welcoming to these female-lead films as

previous measures of success would indicate. I express these findings in a summary report that explores discourse surrounding female representation within the film industry.

*Keywords: Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Film*

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## **1. Introduction and Methodology**

DC's *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) and Marvel's *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019) showcased empowered women, both behind the camera and in front, to critical acclaim and box office promise. These successes are to be celebrated but, unfortunately, are not extremely common. There is an overwhelming presence of male voices in the film industry that restrict female-led projects. Behind the camera, in 2018, "only 1% of films employed 10 or more women" (Lauzen, *The Celluloid Ceiling* 1) as directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers. And, in front of the camera, "audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters" (Lauzen, *Man's (Celluloid) World* 1). The gender disparity extends outside of film production and impacts film criticism. In 2019, men composed 66% of professional critics in the United States (Lauzen, *Thumbs Down* 1) and a similar disparity extends into the user space. Although IMDb users have the option to not report their gender, the data of those who do showcase that, in most cases, male reviewers considerably outnumber females, often by as much as 3:1 (Hickey). For *Captain Marvel*, declared female commenters compose just under 19% of the data pool (*Captain Marvel IMDb*). *Wonder Woman* female commenters comprise 24.4% (*Wonder Woman IMDb*). This gender disparity suggests that females often aren't even the prominent voices surrounding films that showcase them.

This online imbalance is even more damaging offline to films' reputations and money-making abilities, due to "influence effects" and "prediction effects." These detail the tendency of reviews to *influence* what films consumers choose to spend money on, to the extent that good or bad reviews can *predict* box office earnings (Gemser et al. 44). Lauzen also talks of how "[o]n average, [professional] women reviewers award higher quantitative ratings than men to films with female protagonists" (Thumbs Down 5). Thus, a female-led film may not reach its full financial potential if it is not reviewed by other females.

Despite these regrettable statistics, in recent years a building movement has demanded females be placed in positions with more agency in the movie-making process, both as creators and as stars (Erbland). This movement in part stems from the Time's Up and #MeToo movements meant to expose sexual harassment in Hollywood. However, the demand for female storytellers extends much further back than when allegations of sexual misconduct were first brought against Harvey Weinstein. The proper recognition of female creators has been a long time coming.

With that in mind, DC and Marvel releasing *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* into their respective cinematic universes seems a timely step in opening up the industry for more female-led stories. However, despite a vocal subset of the filmmaking industry and the filmgoing population advocating for these films, they still constituted a financial risk for their respective studios. Male-led films (in the superhero genre and others) have proven time and time again that they are profitable at the box office. As a show of financial promise and market viability, the film industry tends to green-light projects that mirror previously successful endeavors (Thompson). The financial success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe was built entirely upon male superheroes until a superheroine finally made her way into half of a title 20 films after the universe's inception with *Ant-Man and The Wasp* (Reed 2018). Out of the 28 films DC has released since their first in 1951,

two were female-lead before the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017. Continuation of the superhero genre alone may be enough to repeat previous successes and thus greenlight future superwomen projects but choosing a female lead over the standard male still comes with the risk of breaking from a previously successful model and making less money.

However, *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* were both successful within Hollywood's typical measures of success: critical rating and box office grosses. Critical rating is used to determine whether or not Hollywood succeeded in making a quality film and is often linked-to potential financial successes (Gemser et al. 57). Box office grosses not only measure how much money the studio is making off of the property but also to determine how wide the film's appeal was and whether to produce a sequel. *Wonder Woman* scored a 93% critical rating on Rotten Tomatoes (*Wonder Woman Rotten Tomatoes*) and approximately \$830 million in worldwide grosses (*Wonder Woman Box Office Mojo*). *Captain Marvel* has a slightly lower, albeit still respectable, Rotten Tomatoes critical score of 78% (*Captain Marvel Rotten Tomatoes*) and managed to accomplish a major financial milestone when it grossed over \$1 billion in the worldwide box office (*Captain Marvel Box Office Mojo*). At the time of writing, *Wonder Woman* has an upcoming sequel, *Wonder Woman: 1984* (Jenkins 2020), and a sequel to *Captain Marvel* is in development with director Nia DaCosta, an African American woman (Kroll).

Strictly taking these measures of success into account, these two films are major achievements. The data would imply that the film industry is prepared to move toward improved inclusivity for female professionals and spectators are inclined to come along. However, things are never quite so simple. After an average person buys a movie ticket, influencing box office gross, a wide array of sentiments still must be taken into account after the credits roll (if the spectator even made it that far). Critical admiration does not guarantee that general audiences agree, and

box office gross does not automatically imply an individual spectator's approval—especially in terms of later sequels' viability. This research analyzes the first 250 IMDb user reviews for *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* to study a facet of what audiences said after viewing.

Reviews on IMDb were chosen because users typically leave longer responses compared to other platforms and thus offer more material for analysis. These 250 reviews for each film were the first ones listed under what IMDb describes as the helpfulness rating in the comment section. This choice has two reasons: first, the helpfulness rating is a system of upvoting in which commenters can indicate which reviews offered them information helpful to formulating their understanding of the texts. Second, this ranking system is the default viewing option.

## **2. Paratextual Privilege**

While the sentiments expressed about each film vary from person to person, amongst the reviews there continually exists a level of animosity toward some opposing force that dared to differ with or censor the group's communal beliefs. These groups include (but are not limited to) fellow user reviewers, film critics, and even the IMDb platform itself. Henry Jenkins noticed a similar conflict between fans and creators of the *Beauty and the Beast* TV show (CBS 1987-1990) (124). Regardless of the media type, spectators have preferences about content they consume, and when creators present something on the contrary, it can often cause friction in the discourse.

While each group at battle in the comments has its concerns, in most cases the roots of this animosity can be linked to Jonathan Grey's ideas about paratextual privilege. Paratexts are pieces of media that externally influence an audience's perspective about a text (Grey 23). These paratexts originate from multiple sources that surround the original text and help create meaning, including studio-run marketing campaigns and critical reviews (143). User reviews expand discourse surrounding Hollywood films because they add a set of novice opinions outside of the views of

Hollywood scholars and professional critics. Thus, these reviews influence interpretations of a text because they allow viewers to consider more than one set of opinions while forming their verdicts on a film. In turn, paratextual privilege relates specifically to “who [of these reviewers] has the power to circulate their own readings and versions of the text en masse” (144).

Reviews, both amateur and professional, shape and inform future understandings of a text. Thus, it stands to reason that only the ‘correct opinion’ about a text’s merit should have the privilege of existing in the paratextual space, to perpetuate a unified understanding amongst spectators and eventually control the text’s reception in society. Oftentimes, reviewers tend to aggressively defend their opinions without considering the value of other points of view. This practice forces films to exist in the two extremes (marvelous or horrendous) and stifles the possibility for discussion because the focus is on annihilating the opposing opinion. In the comment section for these films, IMDb users demonstrated three major battles: user versus professional critic, negative user versus positive user, and user versus review platform.

For *Captain Marvel*, commenters skewed toward pointing out the film’s negative points. Many reviewers were incredulous that the film achieved any of the success the industry claimed it did. To put it explicitly, “the 7.2 [user] score [was] done artificially by bots...and [can]not [be] a testament to how extremely and absolutely bottom poor...the taste of general audiences [is] today” (Sumtim3s00n). Commenters stated that they intended to rate the film lower than they thought it deserved to help compensate for other reviewers rating it highly (Lush12). This discourse was very one-sided and consisted mostly of attacks against the idea that the film was redeemable.

The discourse surrounding *Wonder Woman* brings positive reviews to the conversation. There are still moments when the user reviewers cast an incredulous eye on those who enjoyed the film, but they are not the majority. In general, the positive reviewers react with similar tendencies

to those with negative opinions, just with a different target for their aggression. They often attempt to discredit those who thought negatively of the film by using statements such as “[IMDb] exists in an alternate reality, or...has a bunch of angry, bitter, depressed people reviewing on it” (Cochrandarin). These positive user reviewers steered away from referencing professional critics’ reviews, presumably because they share similar sentiments.

The impression that these sites are an open forum encourages fans to leave hasty and often hateful comments to influence how the text is seen in society. However, this assumption of total freedom is incorrect. On IMDb, notable offenses that can be grounds for temporary or permanent review deletion include “[p]rofanity, obscenities, or spiteful remarks” or “unannounced spoilers” (User Review Guidelines *IMDb*). Even when justified, review removals further incite fan anger and raise accusations of censorship.

In this realm of the average user reviewer, often the only barrier to entry is a free website account and access to a reliable internet connection; they don’t receive the respect that professional critics earn by virtue of their byline, but they have a 24/7 publishing window and the capability to add to an ongoing discussion. Once a film is released, the window to publish reviews never closes. Thus, when a user gets the chance to send their thoughts out into the world, they are doing more than simply sending static theories out into a finite space; these users are contributing to an ongoing discussion where they indirectly interact with all reviews that came before. This first review builds upon the foundation set by the first professional reactions allowed to hit cyberspace: critics and other industry professionals. Any published user review must balance between two sets of previous thoughts, the ever-changing user space with its plethora of strong opinions and the critical space with its wealth of knowledge about filmmaking. For *Captain Marvel* and *Wonder Woman*, this balancing act places the user reviewer on the defensive from the beginning because they must

choose which army to align with. They can either risk going against a horde of angry fans or the professional critics who study film for a living.

So, who has the paratextual privilege to make claims about these films and have people listen to them? Presumably, most members of these opposing groups would respond “anyone besides the people on the other side.” This mindset creates a never-ending loop of one party telling the other that they cannot have a different opinion. There is no space for a thoughtful conversation, only ad hominem attacks. Critics cannot stop users from trashing films that they praised, and users cannot stop other users from disagreeing with their opinions on a film. Ultimately, those who moderate digital spaces determine what can be considered in the discussion via comment removal. But the creation of a responsible, nuanced discussion rests on the users—and the comment sections of *Captain Marvel* and *Wonder Woman* contained far more one-star reviews and inflammatory language than anything approaching subtlety.

### **3. Wonder Woman**

For *Wonder Woman*, quite a few reviewers were pleased with the focus on emotional sincerity and innate femininity in Gal Gadot’s titular performance. One commenter praised that “[h]er tremendous power is counterbalanced with a naivety that reaches beyond comic relief into an often scathing critique of the human leanings toward inhumanity” (Damionis). This comment speaks to the fact that Gadot’s incarnation of Wonder Woman took undeniable influence from the theories formulated by the character’s creator, William Moulton Marston. Marston believed that women were the superior sex due to their increased capacity for love and tenderness and created the character to act as a counterbalance for the overwhelming masculinity present in comic books. He wanted to populate the world with a sort of “psychological propaganda” to showcase the type of woman, nurturing and sensitive, that he believed should, and one day would, be ruling the world

(Stuller 13-15). Marston's theories are problematic because they treat the entire female sex as a singular entity with definable communal emotional characteristics rather than recognizing the innate complexities present in each woman's definition of femininity. However, the idea that traits stereotypically associated with femininity and, by extension, weakness, such as sensitivity and tenderness, can be strengths does have some redeemable qualities. Gadot's Wonder Woman has an undying belief that humans are good, and that the evil god Ares is causing their desire to wage war. While she later must learn that the situation is not quite so simple, her ability to see the promise of a better tomorrow is profound.

The conversation about Wonder Woman's feminism gets further complicated by the addition of the male gaze. First conceived by Laura Mulvey in her revolutionary piece *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*, this school of thought expects females to exist in the cinematic space strictly to be looked at by straight male viewers and is often attributed to the result of males being the dominant content-producing force within the film industry (Mulvey 14). Although *Wonder Woman* is directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins, the film still contains elements of a male gaze hidden within its moments of female empowerment.

*Wonder Woman's* no man's land scene is a revelation for Diana where she stands up for what she believes in and saves the Belgian town from the Germans. Her powers outmatch both her male compatriots trying to hold her back and the German army shooting at her. She is empowered, self-assured, and unwilling to allow anyone to stand in the way of her desire to help the innocent. Wonder Woman is acting with the kind of agency Mulvey attributes to be only available to a male character. To add a feminist reading to the scene is not necessarily unreasonable.

However, users still commented on her attractiveness in the scene. One reviewer referenced Gadot's emergence from the trenches as "some shimmering vision of hotness, to set male and

lesbian hearts a flutter” (Bob-the-movie-man). This reviewer’s wording reduces Wonder Woman back to be an object of sexual desire instead of focusing on her strength. That being said, various elements of the scene contribute to their case. There are slow-motion shots of Diana’s legs, forearms, and calves as she climbs up the ladder and into battle. She walks in gratuitous slow motion into no man’s land with a look of seductive determination on her face. Her armor shows an amount of skin not practical for a battle scenario that emphasizes her chest and tiny waist.

Despite this, Wonder Woman is not irredeemable as a piece of feminist cinema. In many ways, it improves on the genre’s predecessors and breaks ground for superheroines and ordinary female characters in the future. In a world where the American film industry has long been male-led, circumventing oppressive systems that subjugate women into being objects of desire and submissiveness is no easy task. This can mean that while some aspects of the film may take steps forward for female representation, other aspects may constitute a step back. Even films that endeavor to be feminist can still fall victim to misogynistic tropes, such as the male gaze.

Even for film academics, how to improve female representation in the cinematic space is not always entirely clear. They grapple with differing opinions on how to create a “female gaze” to counter the overwhelmingly standard male gaze. Teresa de Laurentis details some historical discrepancies within feminist film scholarship in the 1970s. She states that:

[t]he accounts of feminist film culture...tended to emphasize a dichotomy between...two types of film work that seemed to be at odds with each other: one called for immediate documentation for purposes of political activism...the other insisted on rigorous, formal work...in order to analyze and disengage the ideological codes embedded in representation. (140-141)

In this dichotomy, *Wonder Woman*'s feminism fits closer to "immediate documentation for purposes of political activism." The film is more concerned with adding the best feminist figures it can muster into the social zeitgeist rather than doing rigorous formal work and redefining the meaning of cinema.

This disagreement about how to create positive images for women on screen does not end in academia; user commenters have similar disputes. In the IMDb *Wonder Woman* comment section, viewers clashed over what elements of the film constituted feminist filmmaking and what additions destroyed the message. Some viewers' interpretations align with Marston's theories: they see *Wonder Woman*'s ability to be "charismatic and authoritative but not so much that she loses her feminine charm and sense of humor" as empowering (Politicial); others note how the film "preaches to the audience about pacifism but then hypocritically celebrates 'heroic' violence" (WeeClaude). Ultimately, some appreciate that the film "provides audiences with a female protagonist who is not merely a leader, but the engineer--the author--of her own destiny and story" (RLTerry1); others condemn the idea that *Wonder Woman* is "just dragged from location to location by Steve [Trevor, the film's male lead]" (Evaxbos) similar to the theories of female subjugation presented by Laura Mulvey.

Despite these discrepancies, sincere pursuits to craft films where females are given more equitable roles are still valuable. However imperfect it may be, content made with a sincere amount of a feminist lens in mind can still contribute something beneficial to the cause for equal representation. Given the fact that there is often no single objective answer to whether a film is feminist, audiences (professional and amateur) should lean toward discussion rather than immediate assumption. *Wonder Woman* may be feminist to some, but not to others, and the reasoning behind these judgments can further complicate the discussion around films made with a

feminist lens. The addition of a nuanced conversation encourages filmmakers to redefine their treatment of female characters for the better.

#### **4. Captain Marvel**

This note of positivity is rather fleeting as the comment section on *Captain Marvel* was a cesspool of negativity. The feminism-directed user commentary for this film tended to take two forms: those who took issue with Brie Larson's demeanor during the film's press tour and those who disliked her performance as the titular heroine. Any semblance of respect for the film was minimal, to say the least. Outside of slight shifts in the direction where the hatred was aimed, Brie Larson and her involvement in the film were always the standout problem and the reason that fans were angered or offended.

One popular way these commenters found to criticize Brie Larson was to bring up feminist comments that she made during interviews and on social media. Overall, Larson was seen as someone who "is just VERY unlikable as a person" because "she hates men" and just "wanted to spout feminist hate." As a result, this particular commenter "can no longer bring [themselves] to support a company [Disney/Marvel] that sacrifices everything they've built up over 15+ movies to push some false absurd agenda" (Whathappenedmarvel).

Now, as tends to happen with the internet, by the time that details of an encounter reach the current commenter, it is often far away from the events that occurred. Keeping that phenomenon in mind, what did Brie Larson comment on that made the internet feel the need to unleash complete and utter hell upon her? Strangely enough, she called attention to the scarcity of female critical opinion, particularly with females of color, within the film industry and how it negatively impacts films that star anyone other than the traditional Hollywood white male. During her acceptance speech at the Women in Film Crystal + Lucy award ceremony in June 2018 (a year

before *Captain Marvel*'s release), Larson brought up the disconnect between the demographics of professionals who review films compared to the racial and gender breakdown of the United States. She emphasized throughout the speech that while she “doesn’t hate white dudes,” (2:44-47) the film industry needs to be “conscious of [their] bias and do [their] part to make sure that everyone is in the room” (2:28-54) to ensure that all sides of the discussion relevant to the film’s release are heard and considered. Then, during the *Captain Marvel* press tour, Larson reportedly stood by her word and ensured that she was interviewed by more than just white male reporters. One of the featured journalists included *Marie Clare* contributor Keah Brown, an African American female with cerebral palsy who was often passed up for major interview opportunities (Brown).

This situation speaks to the idea within spectatorship theory that people view media differently based on their diverse backgrounds and experiences. As described by Judith Mayne, “the study of spectatorship involves an engagement with modes of seeing and telling, hearing and listening, not only in terms of how films are structured, but in terms of how audiences imagine themselves” (32). Mayne is addressing that while spectator theory is inherently connected to cinema, the discipline is not limited to solely cinematic study. Instead, spectator theory “has provided a way to understand film in its cultural dimension” (32). Spectator theory is not used to strictly understand how spectators connect to the images on screen. Rather, this dynamic goes a step further by also taking into account how the film affects a wider cultural understanding. By insisting that the discourse surrounding *Captain Marvel* during the press tour be populated by people of diverse experiences and thus, diverse ways of imagining themselves, Larson was improving the discourse pool. She opened it up to people whose experiences often get overlooked and ensured that the film’s reception would be as accurate as possible to the actual diverse makeup of the United States rather than the white male-dominated narrative depiction of it.

Under this logic of spectator subjectivity, Larson's comments and actions appear praiseworthy, as if though all the user backlash is just part of a wild misunderstanding. However, there is one other comment from her initial speech that can be easily misconstrued and, as luck would have it, it very much was. Larson commented on how she "does not need some 40-year-old white dude to tell [her] what didn't work for him about *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay 2018)" as "it wasn't made for him" (3:49-55). This film prominently features a biracial couple and highlights the strengths of their daughter and adopted son. Therefore, the way that an African American, biracial, or adopted person watches *A Wrinkle in Time* may have a deeper impact than those who don't share those demographic backgrounds. While the film's merits can be debated, the cultural impact of the film for underrepresented groups may outvalue the potential pitfalls. The film was made for groups of people in this country who, unlike white men, do not often see themselves portrayed in a positive light on screen.

While according to spectatorship theory this concept is not incorrect, daring to insinuate that a white male is not the intended audience for a film and, therefore, should not be the only voice surrounding it turned out to be a dangerous statement on the internet. As mentioned previously, the IMDb review section is heavily populated by male commenters, similar to that of the professional critical opinion circuit. Rather than taking Larson's comments to heart and trying to work toward a space of increased inclusivity, commenters instead cited a mutated version of Larson's stance and went to work trying to discredit her. One commenter claimed that Larson said, "white guys shouldn't be allowed to watch/review movies" in her "controversial, simply insane past comments" (Cinemaloversclub).

Larson's performance was also frequently negatively compared to those of her Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) predecessors, including Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Chris

Hemsworth, and Scarlett Johansson. Jonathan Gray describes a similar phenomenon in his theories about intertextuality. Gray defines intertextuality as “instances wherein a film or program refers to and builds some of its meaning off another film or program” and the intertext as the “referenced film or program” (117). In this statement, Gray is referring to how understanding the nuances of *West Side Story* (Wise and Robbins 1961) requires a basic understanding of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. However, in the MCU’s case, the texts are no longer adaptations connected by allusion, but intertwined serial episodes. To understand the plot of any one of the movies in totality, spectators must possess knowledge from a previous text and make intertextual connections.

Under this logic, commenters noticing that there are distinct similarities between Larson’s Captain Marvel and previous MCU characters and stories is not altogether unreasonable; all of their stories are inescapably connected. Beyond the obvious gender connection between her and Scarlett Johansson’s *Black Widow*, Larson’s Carol Danvers has a witty sense of humor similar to Robert Downey Jr.’s *Iron Man*, the military experience of Chris Evans’ *Captain America*, and the muscled physique and God-like power of Chris Hemsworth’s *Thor*.

Rather than the user commenters adopting these influences to understand the character further, they created an unattainable bar that Captain Marvel had to meet to be considered successful. Users claimed that in her portrayal of Captain Marvel “[t]here wasn’t any display of fight IQ or heart, something you see in *Captain America* or *Iron Man*” (Htutmaung). Another commenter claimed that “despite the fact that Brie Larson spent her entire press tour bashing men, she spent the entire movie trying to copy the successful act of Robert Downey Jr.... [with his] hilarious one-liners and quips” (Rory\_woodard). This review cements the previous point that the MCU’s intertextuality is not always positive, especially when it comes to the critique of female characters. Brie Larson could not portray her character with a witty sense of humor without being

accused of copying Robert Downey Jr. who was far from the first person to use that character trait in a performance nor will he be the last.

One user claimed that they “[d]on’t need Captain Marvel,” they “[a]lready have [B]lack [W]idow” (Frisco2007). This comment yet again demonstrates the prevalence of the male gaze in Hollywood films. In many ways, Black Widow is an empowered female character. However, this does not mean that her treatment within the MCU was always entirely fair or free from a level of the male gaze. She was introduced into the universe as an object of sexual desire for Tony Stark and while this dynamic did not last long, the overt male-gaze sexuality of her character never quite went away. Her combat attire was often a skintight leather jumpsuit with a strategically placed zipper that was always slightly unzipped at her chest. Additionally, she never achieved a status above secondary character throughout the ten years between her character introduction and death, in contrast to newer male characters getting solo films, such as Doctor Strange.

Captain Marvel presents a female image contrary to those that came before her. For one, she already escaped the fate of Black Widow by appearing in her solo film before any others. In addition, her costuming infuses a level of combat practicality not often seen with previous female heroes. Although she still wears a skintight bodysuit, it mirrors the costuming of her male compatriots and does not overly emphasize her breasts. Captain Marvel also escapes the film without any trace of a male romantic interest. She has meaningful relationships with both Nick Fury and fellow former Air Force pilot, Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch) with her daughter, Monica (Akira Akbar). This arc emphasizes Captain Marvel’s ability to have purposeful relationships without them being heterosexually romantic—she gains strength in being a friend, rather than weakness in being a passive love interest.

Captain Marvel's story also invites a reading in contrast to Wonder Woman's journey of self-discovery. Both heroines' journeys hinge upon the fact that, in society, women face stereotypes of being less rational, more emotional and thus, weaker, than men. Wonder Woman finds her strength in redefining these generalizations. Her emotion and compassion fuel her heroic behavior and she uses her immense physical strength to accomplish her goal of saving the innocent. Wonder Woman is heroic because she cares deeply for others but must learn that right and wrong are not always so precisely defined.

Captain Marvel takes a vastly different journey. At the beginning of the film, Danvers, or, as she is called at the time, Vers, is held back by her male trainer, Yon-Rogg (Jude Law), and the "Supreme Intelligence" (Annette Bening) of her world. Their training mantra is that, in order to become an effective warrior, she must fight analytically rather than emotionally. However, Vers' atomic power becomes more effective when fueled by her anger or excitement, and ultimately her suppression of emotion in battle only benefits those controlling her. Captain Marvel's power is linked to her emotional expression and she reaches her full potential when her emotion and logic are used in tandem. The movie is far from subtle in exploring workplace discrimination against women, but it takes more time to highlight the effort involved in resistance than *Wonder Woman's* display of idealistic determination.

However, the commenters' backlash would perhaps indicate that *Captain Marvel's* version of feminism was not what they wanted. Previous superheroines were praised as feminist (Wonder Woman and Black Widow) simply because they were not damsels, but often remained unchallenging on a fundamental level. Captain Marvel's feminist journey introduces Danvers as a witty hero who is dirty, angry, and difficult—similar to Tony Stark—and who destroys a male oppressor in an anti-patriarchal beatdown. *Captain Marvel's* plot explicitly relies on defying

systems of male control, and the film rejects traditional male-gazey cinematography to present an empowered woman who must unleash her complete emotional intensity to achieve her full strength. *Captain Marvel* requires that viewers adjust their schemas for what a female character should be, even more dramatically than they have for previous superwomen. However, as shown in the previous discussion of IMDb response, commenters have not yet welcomed this particular new norm and even praised older schemas (“I don’t need Captain Marvel, I have Wonder Woman”), in hopes of reversing Captain Marvel’s new paradigm in future films.

When audiences idealize a universe’s male characters and appreciate female characters who retain a level of the male gaze, films breaking the status quo can lead to a furious and bewildered response. The male gaze’s power in Hollywood has only been exaggerated with the addition of the heavy intertextuality of the cinematic universe. When each text is defined by the texts that came before, adopting a different filmmaking lens becomes even more prominent and perhaps even more jarring. To create a feminist character in the superhero genre is often a process of give and take, as the filmmakers must balance studio expectations, previous films, and audience desires on top of their creative processes, even before the film hits the screen. But the creative leadership for the MCU has already proven for 12 years with wild success, including the release of the highest-grossing film of all time, *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo 2019), (Yedroudj) that they are willing to portray female characters that submit to the male gaze, including Black Widow. Changing the status quo is more of a challenge when creators have already crafted an audience-pleasing and critically-approved formula.

## **5. Conclusion**

So, if the current superhero film formula is clearly working at the box office and in critics’ columns, why try and change it? To put it simply, female characters deserve better. Their stories

should not be written strictly to supplement a male's journey and their bodies are worth more than existing to satisfy sexual fantasies. To achieve this new state of female respect, it will require escaping the bound of what intertextuality deems acceptable. While it may make some spectators angry or uncomfortable, breaking these habits is an important step in redefining a female's role in cinema. *Wonder Woman* is an example of the give-and-take conflict between feminism and patriarchy in Hollywood; the result is neither horrific nor perfect but one that lays the groundwork for future superheroines. *Captain Marvel* showcases an attempt at escaping the confines of the protagonist's intertextual relationship to previous Marvel characters and defining her as a successful hero in her own right. However, the audience response on IMDb reveals that the online reviewer community still has work to do to fairly critique feminist works.

This research is only a small facet of the wide array of work to be done in making the space equitable for *all* women. LGBTQ+ women and women of color have stories that differ from those of straight, white women but are often overlooked. In 2019, 20% of female characters from films were black, 7% Asian, and 5% Latina (Lauzen, *Man's (Celluloid) World 1*). A study conducted by GLAAD in 2018 found that only 20 out of 110 films selected from the year contained an LGBTQ+ character of any gender. Adding on to this, inclusion does not equal adequate representation. Women of these backgrounds are both infrequently featured in major box office films, and when they do appear, they are rarely the center point of the story.

Simply putting a female on the screen does not constitute all-encompassing representation. The female character must be treated fairly, and the filmmakers must be attentive about how their decisions may affect the larger feminist film movement. This means dispelling moments of the male gaze whenever possible, giving the female character an active voice in her story, and being conscious about making content that represents women in a wide array of dispositions. However,

all of these tasks often cannot often be accomplished in any singular film. Creating the perfect female character who can single-handedly dispel years' worth of exclusions and misrepresentations on her own is a tall, essentially impossible, order. No singular film should try to overcome every hindrance because then no one gets their due. It takes numerous films that each tackle some facet of this complex issue to create more equitable representation.

In an online culture where polarizing reviews are largely male-written, the critique of feminist films like *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* is flawed. Simply proclaiming a film to be terrible shuts down potential avenues for improvement. It's more important to establish a curious and open-minded way of looking at films than to expect creators to make something perfect. In fact, the films will likely be imperfect, like both *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*. It is more effective to create a multitude of stories that imperfectly tackle some facet of complex issues of representation. This complexity stimulates discussion and a desire to improve—audiences will never be able to just go home satisfied because sexism has been solved by one film. Critics and users have to keep questioning and allowing nuanced dialogue to rise to the top rather than extreme opinions. Creators and executives must continue creating female characters as powerful, complex beings who are more than girlfriends. And during this conversation, female critics, executives, directors, actors, and audience members should all chime in on how to right historical imbalances. Not all women have to agree about the best way to improve representation, but it is not a man's job to decide alone the best way to legitimize a female's status as a powerful being. In the end, "it wasn't made for him."

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