

## **“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 did or did not resonate with them. This research 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. The research consisted of reading and coding meaningful sentiments from the first 250 IMDb user reviews for each film to evaluate audiences’ perspectives on themes. This sentiment speaks to changes within the gender culture of the film industry as well as the viability of these films in the future. Reviewers primarily took issue with the films’ portrayal of feminism as well as actresses’ actions both outside of the film and within. Incidentally, reviewers also took issue with aspects not related to the films’ content including the moderation of review platforms as well as how the films compared to previous installments within their respective universes. In general, user critics on IMDb were much less welcoming to these female lead films as previous measures of success would indicate. The final product is a summary report that explores discourse that surrounds female representation within the film industry using influence from theories about spectatorship, feminism, the superhero genre, paratexts, and convergence culture.

**Keywords:** *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, Film

### **1. Introduction And Methodology**

DC’s *Wonder Woman*<sup>1</sup> and Marvel’s *Captain Marvel*<sup>2</sup> 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” as directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers<sup>3</sup>. And, in front of the camera, “audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters”<sup>4</sup>. The gender disparity extends outside of film production and impacts film criticism. In 2019, men comprised 66% of professional critics in the United States<sup>5</sup> and a similar disparity extends into the userspace. 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<sup>6</sup>. For *Captain Marvel*, declared female commenters comprise just under 19% of the data pool<sup>7</sup>. *Wonder Woman* female commenters comprise 24.4%<sup>8</sup>. This gender disparity can mean that females often aren’t even the prominent voices within 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 a good or bad review can *predict* box office earnings<sup>9</sup>. Lauzen also talks of how "[o]n average, [professional] women reviewers award higher quantitative ratings than men to films with female protagonists"<sup>10</sup>. A female-led film may not reach its full potential if it is not reviewed by other females.

Despite these regrettable statistics, in recent years there has been a building movement that demands females to be placed in positions with more agency in the movie-making process, both as creators and as stars<sup>11</sup>. This movement in part stems from and is encouraged by the Time's Up and #MeToo movements meant to expose sexual harassment within Hollywood. But the demand for female storytellers extends much further back than when allegations of sexual misconduct were first brought against Harvey Weinstein. The recognition of female creators has been a long time coming.

So, 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. But, 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. And, as a show of financial promise and market viability, the film industry tends to greenlight projects that mirror previously successful endeavors<sup>12</sup>. The financial success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe was built entirely upon male superheroes until a superheroine finally made her way into a title 20 films after the universe's inception (*Ant-Man and The Wasp*)<sup>13</sup>. Out of the 28 DC films 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.

Despite the potential pitfalls, *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<sup>14</sup>. Box office grosses not only measure how much money the studio is making off of the property but also are used 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 and an approximately \$830 million in worldwide grosses<sup>15</sup>. *Captain Marvel* has a slightly lower, albeit still respectable, Rotten Tomatoes score of 78% and managed to accomplish a major financial milestone when it grossed over \$1 billion in the worldwide box office<sup>16</sup>. As of this writing, a *Wonder Woman* sequel has been released, *Wonder Woman: 1984*<sup>17</sup>, and a sequel to *Captain Marvel* is in development with director, Nia Da Costa, an African American woman<sup>18</sup>.

Strictly taking these two measures of success into account, these two films are major achievements. The data would imply that perhaps 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 feel the same way, 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 viewers said after they left the theater.

Reviews on IMDb were chosen because users typically leave longer responses on this site as 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 advantages: 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. And 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 seemed to exist 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<sup>18</sup>. 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<sup>20</sup>. These paratexts originate from multiple sources that surround the original text and help create meaning, including studio-run marketing campaigns and critical reviews<sup>21</sup>. User reviews expand discourse surrounding Hollywood films because they add a set of opinions contrary to those of the trained eyes 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"<sup>22</sup>.

Reviews, both amateur and professional, shape and inform future understandings of a text. So it stands to reason that only the 'correct opinion' about the text 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. Problem being, everyone thinks that they are 'correct' and will aggressively defend their opinions without considering the value of other points of view. This practice forces films to exist in the two extremes (all bad or all good) and stifles the possibility for discussion because this mentality focuses on annihilating the opposite opinion from existence. In the comment section for these films, IMDb users demonstrated three major battles: user versus professional critic, negative user versus positive, and user versus review platform.

For *Captain Marvel*, commenters heavily 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"<sup>23</sup>. In addition, commenters stated that they intended to rate the film lower than they thought it deserved to help compensate for other reviewers rating it highly<sup>24</sup>. This discourse was very one-sided and consisted mostly of attacks against the idea that the film was in any way 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, 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"<sup>25</sup>. 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 often encourages fans to leave hasty comments that can be incredibly hateful 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 in either the body or header of [the] review" or "unannounced spoilers"<sup>26</sup>. 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 for sharing their cinematic opinions 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. And, once a film is released, the window to publish reviews never closes. Films released 100 years ago still can receive new user reviews. 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 static 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.

## 4. Wonder Woman

For *Wonder Woman*, quite a few reviewers were pleased with the focus on emotional sincerity and innate femininity in Gadot's 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"<sup>27</sup>. 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's 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<sup>28</sup>. 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 typically 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 of Wonder Woman's feminism gets further completed by the addition of the male gaze. The male gaze was first conceived by Laura Mulvey in her revolutionary piece *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*<sup>29</sup>. 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. Although *Wonder Woman* is directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins, the film still contains elements of a male gaze hidden with its moments of female empowerment.

*Wonder Woman's* no man's land scene is a powerful 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. So, 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 version of hotness, to set male and lesbian hearts a flutter"<sup>30</sup>. This reviewer's wording reduces Wonder Woman back to being an object of sexual desire. But, various elements of the scene contribute to his 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 entirely practical for a battle scenario that emphasizes her chest and tiny waist.

Despite this, *Wonder Woman* is not an irredeemable piece of feminist cinema. In many ways, it improves on the genre's predecessors and breaks ground for superheroes and ordinary female characters in the future. Creating a perfectly feminist film may very well be impossible. 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" of sorts to counter the overwhelmingly standard male gaze. Teresa de Laurentis details some historical discrepancies within feminist film scholarship in the 1970s. She states that "the 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"<sup>31</sup>. 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 clashes about what is feminist and what isn't. 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<sup>32</sup>; others note how the film “preaches to the audience about pacifism but then hypocritically celebrates ‘heroic’ violence”<sup>33</sup>. Ultimately, some audiences 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”<sup>34</sup>; others condemn the idea that Wonder Woman is “just dragged from location to location by Steve [Trevor, the film’s male lead]”<sup>35</sup>, 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 gaze 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 complicated discussion about these issues is positive because it encourages representation to further improve. These audience conversations encourage filmmakers to continue redefining their treatment of female characters.

## 5. 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”<sup>36</sup>. 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”<sup>37</sup>.

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 can see and 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,”<sup>38</sup> the film industry needs to be “conscious of [their] bias and do [their] part to make sure that everyone is in the room”<sup>39</sup> 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<sup>40</sup>. One featured journalist was *Marie Clare* contributor Keah Brown, an African-American female with cerebral palsy who was often passed up for major interview opportunities<sup>41</sup>.

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”<sup>42</sup>. 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”<sup>43</sup>. 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 seem innocent enough, even praiseworthy and as 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. During her speech, Larson comments 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*" as "it wasn't made for him"<sup>44</sup>. 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*, they may feel a stronger impact from the film than those who don't share those demographic backgrounds. This matters because, while the film's merits can be debated, the cultural impact of the film for underrepresented groups may outweigh the potential pitfalls. The film was made for groups of people in this country who do not often see themselves portrayed in a positive light on screen, unlike white men from nuclear families.

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"<sup>45</sup>.

Outside of this, Larson's performance was frequently negatively compared to 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 that the intertext as the "referenced film or program"<sup>46</sup>. In this statement, Gray is referring to how understanding the nuances of *West Side Story* requires a basic understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>47</sup>. However, in the MCU's case, the texts are not solely 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 incredible 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"<sup>48</sup>. 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"<sup>49</sup>. 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"<sup>50</sup>. 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 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. And, 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. Instead, she has a meaningful platonic relationship with a fellow former Air Force pilot, Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch) and 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 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 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, and often remained sweet and sexy and un-challenging on a fundamental level. However, 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. Spectators in IMDb comment sections were used to passively feminist superwomen, and the new complexity of *Captain Marvel* was not a welcome addition. *Captain Marvel* requires that viewers adjust their schemas for what a female character should be, even more dramatically than they already have for previous women in superhero genres. *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 possesses physical strength AND emotional expression. From passive love objects to warriors and scientists, from idealists to gritty comedians, superwomen have transformed via writers introducing new models to audiences, who then accept them as normal after time and continued exposure. However, as shown in the previous discussion of IMDb response, commenters did not welcome this 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. So, 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 that they are willing to portray female characters that submit to the male gaze, including Black Widow. In this process, the MCU has become a box office powerhouse that now holds the record for the highest-grossing film of all time<sup>51</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

So, if the current superhero film formula for character and story is clearly working at the box office and in critics' columns, why try and change it? Well, 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. Just because a previous text deemed a behavior tolerable does not mean it must continue to be. 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 her intertextual relationship to previous Marvel characters and defining her as a successful character in her own right. However, 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<sup>52</sup>. And 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<sup>53</sup>. Despite 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.

Heading into 2020, all films slated for release by both Marvel and DC prominently featured women both in front of and behind the camera. Their releases have since changed due to COVID-19 but this does not detract from the noticeable changes in gender proportion. In February DC released female-directed *Birds of Prey* starring a less male-gaze influenced interpretation of Harley Quinn<sup>54</sup>. The sequel to *Wonder Woman*, *Wonder Woman: 1984*, was slated for release in June before being moved to December. Marvel was finally slated to give Black Widow her due in May 2020 with a female-directed solo film<sup>55</sup> that got moved to May 2021. And, Marvel's *The Eternals* got moved to from November 2020 to November 2021. This film is both directed by a Chinese woman<sup>56</sup> (Chloë Zhao) and has an ensemble cast prominently featuring several women of diverse races (Gemma Chan, Lauren Ridloff, and Salma Hayek). Several of these films also feature non-straight, non-white, women in prominent positions. *Birds of Prey*'s Renee Montoya (Rosie Perez) is a Hispanic woman who grapples with a troublesome working relationship with her ex-girlfriend, Ellen Yee (Ali Wong). And *The Eternals* will feature Makkari, the first deaf superhero in the MCU as portrayed by deaf, biracial actress, Lauren Ridloff. These films' choices to include women of diverse backgrounds does constitute a step forward for representing marginalized groups. But, the space is not yet equitable; the inclusion of non-straight and/or women of color is still often done through secondary characters or as part of an ensemble cast.

In the end, simply putting a female on the screen does not constitute all-encompassing representation. The female 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 suits people in a way array of dispositions rather than limiting to a select few. However, all of these tasks often cannot 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, by doing so, no one gets their due. Underrepresented people deserve more than haphazard attempts to craft a film that pleases everyone; their stories are important enough to warrant the full attention of filmmakers. It often 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 and rating it 1-star shuts down potential avenues for improvement. Even flawed films, such as *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, have something valuable to offer the discussion, even if that entrails advice about what not to do in the future. 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. Thus it is more effective to create a multitude of stories that imperfectly tackle some facet of these complex issues. 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 have to 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 the best way to legitimize a female's status as a powerful being suited for more than romantic attraction. In the end, "it wasn't made for him".

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