

SUBMITTING TO LOVING AUTHORITY: WONDER WOMAN'S DELEUZO GUATTARIAN ETHICS¹

Troy Michael Bordun

ABSTRACT

In this article, I read Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette's *Wonder Woman: Earth One, Volume 1* (2016) through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophy to challenge the superhero comics narrative convention of using violence as the sole means in a hero's transcendent pursuit of justice. Deleuze and Guattari critique goal-oriented sexuality as a call for different modes of thinking about ethics and interpersonal relations. I apply their insights to superhero comics wherein we find heroes' aggressive climaxes of physical power that set things right, i.e., back to the way things were. Most heroes are thus goal-oriented, hyper-violent, and conservative; they beat the villains into compliance to return the world to its previous order. Wonder Woman, on the contrary, turns towards what I call the ethics of the caress. She deploys intimate conversation and physical affection as well as espouses vulnerability to thereby transform her interlocutors—whether men or fellow Amazons—into submissive counterparts to “*change the world for the better*” (Morrison and Paquette 2016).

Keywords: affect, gender stereotypes, Deleuze, Wonder Woman, comics, superheroine.

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The slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm; orgasm is a mere fact, a rather deplorable one, in relation to desire in pursuit of its principle. Everything is allowed: all that counts is for pleasure to be the flow of desire itself, Immanence...

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 156)

Upon its publication, Michel Foucault (1977) pronounced that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is a book of ethics that helps combat “the fascism in us all” (xiii). In addition to its political dimensions, Foucault's definition of fascism appears at the level of the individual in their desire to oppress others and become enamored with power.

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Although set in fictional universes, it is worthwhile to consider Foucault's observation with superheroes in mind. When left unchecked and unchallenged, great strength often leads superpowered individuals toward this kind of fascism. An uncharitable glance at Batman could show him to be an exemplary fascist. For example, in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Batman enacts "conspicuous displays of power" paralleling "Reagan-era cold war politics" (Klock 45–46), and thereby becomes a symbol of 1980s US hegemony. In short, from petty crooks to mass-murdering terrorists, Batman leaves no criminal unpunished, regardless of their pasts or class, and he is hard and unyielding in his transcendent, aggressive, and physical pursuit of vigilante justice.

Conversely, Diana Prince, aka Wonder Woman, uses her muscles when combatants leave her no other recourse, but she does not neglect her strengths in conversation and affection. As many commentators note, she operates with love and mercy (Manning 2021, 345; Cocca 2021, 28) and plays a more involved game of dialogue and diplomacy, or what Francis Tobienne Jr. (2017) calls "passionate persuasion," often refusing to fall back on a climactic haymaker to save the day (133). This puts her at odds with vigilante superheroes such as Batman and she thus offers an alternative to an ethical system that is prescriptive in a top-down manner. Wonder Woman's ethics are lateral and formed in and through communication and communion.

Wonder Woman's early history is also erotically charged. In this article, I take sexuality and eroticism as a lens to unpack her ethics in Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette's 2016 stand-alone graphic novel *Wonder Woman: Earth One*. To do this, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari's onto-ethics and interpret their system through their modest discussions of sexuality and immanence. I further link the authors' attempts to revolutionize the conception of desire to Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott's (2021) formulations of comics' queerness. I aim to show that Wonder Woman is an exemplary superhero of what I am calling the ethics of the caress, and her affectionate heroism is held contrary to the fierce and violent vigilante. I begin in 1941 with Wonder Woman's creator William Moulton Marston and his theory of psycho-social interaction, however erroneous it may be, and note its implementation in the first major female superhero comics of the twentieth century. Then, I draw a line from Marston to Deleuze and Guattari and extend their insights to Morrison and Paquette. According to Carolyn Cocca (2021), for the Wonder Woman of the 2010s, "the major changes were the initial desexualization of her portrayal albeit still in her usual outfit, the rewriting of her origin story, and her increased use of violence" (14). While Cocca's general observation may be true for the early and mid-2010s comics, in my reading of Morrison and Paquette's work I find examples of the ethics of the caress in Wonder Woman's intimate communication, both physical and verbal. Cocca (2021) writes that the 2010s Wonder Woman comics penned by Greg Rucka, Shea Fontana, Steve Orlando, and G. Willow Wilson—and I would include Morrison as well—depict a hero who "promotes dialogue, empathy, subjectivity, and empowerment," resulting in a

feminist approach to security and, as I read it, ethics (28). Unlike the aforementioned authors, Morrison adopts Marston's Wonder Woman as a foundation for their story. They reformulates the original Amazons' world and their ethics for the twenty-first century. But Morrison is less interested in homage to Marston's theories; instead, they fashion a superhero comic that is almost without physical aggression and they utilize depictions of bondage as a clearer metaphor for ethical reflection than in the early series. I will explore three facets of Wonder Woman's ethical system, each of which requires language and physical touch: knowing the limits of one's strength, espousing vulnerability over invulnerability, and practicing affection over brutality. Her system is not tied to prescribed sets of behaviours but one grounded in ontology, embodiment, and recognition of others.

1. WONDER WOMAN'S KINKY HISTORY

After taking inspiration from feminist utopia science fiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among others (Lepore 2015, 241–42, 279–83), psychology professor William Moulton Marston fashioned Wonder Woman to promote his brand of feminism. As important for Marston's feminism was what he called DISC (Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Compliance) theory, a psychological account of human behaviour he developed in the late 1920s. DISC theory has three governing principles: 1) *dominance* is the drive to subjugate a weaker force and *compliance* marks the reluctant position of giving into the stronger force; 2) *inducement* is the act of convincing, even rewarding, a weaker force into willing, loving *submission*; and 3) people are happiest when submitting to loving authority (Wood 2017, 27–40). According to it, men are prone to the more aggressive forms of dominance and compliance, while women operate with inducement and submission. Since women are allegedly prone to using inducement and people are happiest when submitting to a loving authority, Marston believed that women should be in power, ruling with peace and love (Chavez, Gavalier, and Goldberg 2017, 188–90). As Mara Wood (2017) clarifies, although Marston's theories are not used in contemporary psychology, his work remains a part of the history of the discipline and practice (28).

If DISC theory were accurate, Marston would proclaim that young boys need to learn to voluntarily submit to women in all aspects of life—women will then gain political power and control. That having been said, Marston developed his theory prior to the emergence of the sociology of gender in the latter half of the twentieth century. From the contemporary perspective, as Lewis Call (2012) notes, Marston's understanding of gender is essentialist (a trait, biological or otherwise, rooted in pre-social constructions of gender); however, while Marston may assign certain traits to specific genders before social construction, he did not believe in an essentialist notion of power, i.e., men could also adopt feminine approaches to leadership and ethics. Women do not need to have all the power, yet men do need to practice inducement and submission to loving authority to not only bring about equality among genders but at the height of World War II, to combat

fascism too (Call 2012, 29–30, 34). As Marston put it when talking about his comics series, “Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, I believe, should rule the world” (qtd. in Lepore 2015, 190–91). In the for-profit comics industry, however, feminist politics would not sell, thus the author included feminist insight into a superhero comic by way of covert and overt depictions of sexuality. For this latter reason, Call (2012) posits that Wonder Woman is a character whose beginnings marked a small turning point in the cultural imaginary when it comes to sexual politics and ethics (27).

According to Call (2012), “[i]n her best moments [of the Golden Age], Wonder Woman showed how power could be reconfigured, how the authoritarian power structures of militarism, fascism and sexism could be replaced by structures of ethical, erotic power” (35). Wonder Woman comics can thus be read as pedagogy for intimate communication and practice. In Marston’s run (1941–1947), he literalizes this pedagogy in the characters’ penchants for non-sexualized BDSM. By non-sexualized BDSM, I mean that for all ages DC Comics audiences, the editors would not have permitted direct representations of sexual acts. Nevertheless, according to Noah Berlatsky (2015), “Marston’s comics ... are supposed to initiate their audience into masochism and submission. But part of that initiation is precisely that the gender of the audience is not specified and, indeed, can be considered malleable” (114–15). Wonder Woman is tied, bound, gagged, chained, paddled, and abducted in most issues in those first years of publication. Moreover, it is often women who perform many of these instances of BDSM. Given Marston’s research on sororities at Tufts University (Berlatsky 2015, 144), his writings about lesbian sex in *Emotions of Normal People* (1928) (Berlatsky 2015, 146–48), and his polyamorous relationship with Elizabeth Holloway and Olive Byrne (Berlatsky 2015, 149–52), it is impossible to not see the Wonder Woman author’s depictions of “erotic female-female play ... as anything but intentional” (145).

While Marston’s psychological work and his Wonder Woman comics are steeped in gender essentialism and misandry (Berlatsky 2015, 173–75), the comics’ narratives and visual representations are more complicated than this. I observe that Wonder Woman often willingly performs helplessness and is subsequently tied and bound to better understand the villains’ plans or to receive transport to their secret hideouts (Fig. 1). When it comes to her role as the dominant, Wonder Woman bounds others with care (Call 2012, 36–37; Chavez, Gavalier, and Goldberg 2017, 194). She lets herself be captured and taken to the villains’ lairs, only to defeat them with inducement, submission, and bondage rather than with her mighty fists (Brown 2020, 267–73). Submission and bondage, then, are both superhero tactics and a means of communication. Although her god-like status allows her to remain at a distance from personal harm and harming others, she nevertheless does not act as a god above mortals. For example, when she rescues her love interest Steve Trevor in *Sensation Comics* #2, he calls Diana his oft-used pet name, Angel, and she

coily responds, “What’s an angel? I think I’d rather be a woman” (Marston and Peter 2016, 40–41). This remark puts Wonder Woman’s feet on the ground in the most literal sense.

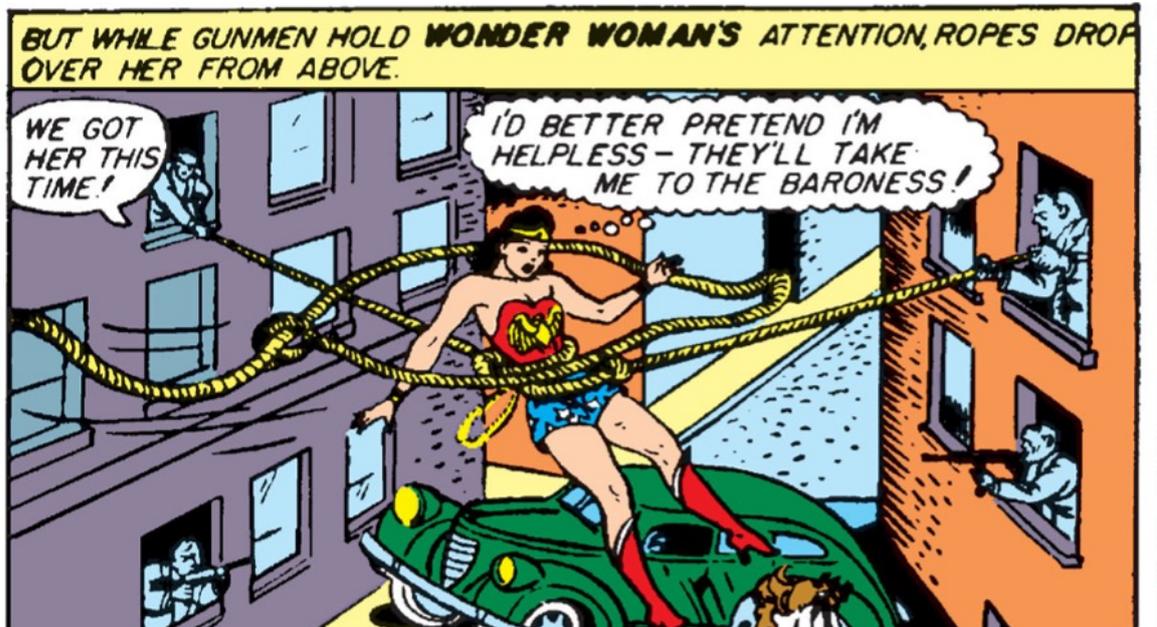


Figure 1 Wonder Woman feigns helplessness to outsmart the henchmen. *Sensation Comics* #7 in *Wonder Woman: The Golden Age, Volume 1*, William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, 110 ©DC Comics, 2016.

Marston’s feminism thus proposes cunning and dialogue over brutality and aggression, and this applies to other characters in the comics as well as for the readers to incorporate into their everyday lives. Indeed, throughout the Golden Age, Wonder Woman suggests that “women can be as strong and independent as she is if they believe in themselves and have proper physical training” (Cocca 2016, 28). This positivity aside, there has been no shortage of critics and commentators pointing to a major problem of the comic: Marston and artist H. G. Peter objectify women for “male fantasies of sexual domination” (Reynolds qtd. in Berlatsky 2015, 18). After detailing the theoretical framework in the next section, I will demonstrate that Wonder Woman is more convincingly ethical in her twenty-first century configurations. The character is less bound to her creator’s essentialist views of gender and, at times, less constricted by the need to be sexualized (Cocca 2021, 5). Morrison and Paquette follow Marston’s vision much more than other recent iterations of the character but provide a less objectifying gaze, deepen the ethical significance of bondage, and forego excessive superhero violence. The creators pick up the common superhero theme of great power demanding great responsibility then stress how superhero comics have misunderstood this to mean wielding great physical strength to subdue enemies and dissenters. To forge those connections between herself and others, whether friends or foes, Wonder Woman extends a hand and caresses with language.

2. Intimacy and Violence, Caresses and Orgasms, Queerness in Comics

Given the remarks above about Wonder Woman's early history, a theory of sexuality, embodiment, and ethics is best suited to my purposes in the forthcoming analysis of *Earth One*. Deleuze and Guattari do not condemn goal-oriented sexuality, but in minor notes on sexuality across *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they set the phallogocentric orgasm against the prolonged caress, cuddle, and snuggle to show how insidious fascistic thinking is in everyday behaviour. Frida Beckman (2013) observes that Deleuze and Guattari's "idea of the orgasm as a release that brings the contentment of an endpoint is clearly coloured by Freudian ideas as well male experience," and for Elizabeth Grosz, their view is "based on a male model that has informed the idea of erotic pleasure" (qtd. in Beckman 2013, 3–4). While Beckman ponders whether Deleuze is curiously reproducing some of the same gendered takes on sexuality he aimed to dismantle, she counters the criticism by identifying the orgasm as part of the composition of sexual activities rather than as a universal end (2015, 5). The crucial claim is that a person's desire to reach a pre-defined endpoint prior to interactions with another person blocks myriad other forms of communication and cooperation. Thus, regarding sexuality and intimacy, Deleuze and Guattari suggest a prolonged communion of two or more bodies through touch—what they call immanence—rather than concluding sexual activity with an orgasm. What Deleuze and Guattari urge people to do is not set limits on sexuality; instead, if desires are left free to roam, individuals can find new and diverse pleasures apart from, or in addition to, genital-finality and animality. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari call a line of flight a path in which desire can flow in innumerable directions with no premeditation or ends in sight. The orgasm is an end while the caress, which includes any language that fondles the senses, can go on indefinitely in any number of lines. The cuddle is no longer something one must do after sex—it is the sex or, it is better than the sex.

For this to happen, Deleuze and Guattari posit a reorientation of desire. Desire is a force or power that forms connections among machines, their term for organic and inorganic bodies and things. Desire is not the end point of fantasies, such as an object of affection. Desire invests itself in relations among machines. These connections are not wholes, as in the statement "I desire this person," but partial objects discovering one another. For instance, a hand placed upon someone's arm is, first, that connection between two separate bodies—desire is the force that brings the hand and arm together, much like a wasp and an orchid are mutual attractors that both benefit from the interaction. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write, "the wasp is ... deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus" (10). A force brings the wasp to the orchid, and it becomes a necessary component in the assemblage of the orchid's reproductive cycle and vice versa. Deleuze and Guattari call attention to this kind of assemblage as a "heterogeneous coupling" of two partial objects that are marked by their respective differences

(Flieger 2000, 55). Indeed, for Jerry Aline Flieger, neither wasp nor orchid conquer or lure one another, nor try to imitate or mime one another to bring about that coupling. Instead, they occupy states of mutual becoming, i.e., exhibit desire as a force for creating the new assemblage of wasp-orchid, or the becoming orchid of the wasp and the becoming-wasp of the orchid with their respective connections (2000, 53–55). Similarly, then, when hands connect, the two individuals form a new kind of assemblage: the hands may quickly pull back at the touch or they may hold one another for hours until the palms are sweaty. Thus, desire is never for a specific object or state and neither does it lack an object. According to philosophers from Plato to Sigmund Freud (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 157), individuals may desire muscles, power, and lovers because they lack them. For Deleuze and Guattari (1977), desire is instead the name given to the spark that attaches to boundless creative outputs and productions. Relating to the above example, desire brings about touch because touch is immanently pleasurable. The output of desire is aptly named desiring-production. Desire creates with limited resources: “desire ‘needs’ very few things... and... what is missing is not things a subject feels the lack of somewhere deep down inside himself, but rather the objectivity of man [sic], the objective being of man [sic], for whom to desire is to produce, to produce within the realm of the real” (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 47). There is no end to the flow, to the pleasure, and to the number of new connections that can be formed between body-machines (20, 36, 47; Colebrook 2002, 142). Desire is therefore revolutionary, capable of overturning social orders and, for my purposes in this chapter, the ethics of the orgasm.

First, as noted above, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy is not without its problems. On the one hand, scholars have faulted them for introducing yet more male-created abstract conceptualizations at the expense of the material reality of bodies, particularly women’s bodies. Rosi Braidotti (2011) writes, “by dissolving the subject in a flux of desire without negativity, Deleuze ... does not recognize any priority to sexual difference, therefore attributing the same psychic and political gestures to men and women alike” (252–253). This leads to a spurious conclusion that there is “clear equivalence” of psychic, social, and political realities among different genders. Moreover, Deleuze seems to misunderstand feminism altogether (Braidotti 2011, 253–55). While neglecting the material reality of bodies and downplaying the importance of identity, Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy nevertheless allows for new approaches to sexuality such as in BDSM. With BDSM, Andrea Beckmann (2009) identifies the redeployment of the body: “consensual ‘SM’ often involves the use of the genital zones for other purposes than the reaching of orgasm and as it also eroticizes regions of the ‘body’ formerly not considered to be worth stimulating, [and] these ‘bodily practices’ symbolize also a ‘remapping’ of the individual ‘body’ and a redistribution of the sensations of the ‘body’” (170). According to its practitioners, consensual sadomasochism does not exclude the orgasmic, nor the spiritual; rather, they divert their practices away from genital finality: “The reaching of an emotional,

psychological, or spiritual state of catharsis, ecstasy, or transcendence during an S/M scene without having a genital orgasm” (Califia qtd. in Beckmann 2009, 194).² Or, as one of Beckmann’s (2009) interviewees puts it, they transform the pain from caning to the genitals to reach orgasm (217). In short, individuals reorient desire such that it does not find its endpoint in a climax but in continuous vibrations across various regions of the body and a variety of different assemblages and formations among the participants.

For this article, I understand Deleuze and Guattari’s dualism—orgasm and caress—as metaphorical rather than literal. In my reading of two of DC Comics’ biggest heroes, Batman and Wonder Woman stand as representatives of the two regimes of ethics. Batman’s climaxes of power violence are not unlike the phallogentric orgasm Deleuze and Guattari may have had in mind. He looks for the right moves and opportune openings to reach his desired end state, and with one swift punch or kick, he can put bank robbers and supervillains to rest. In the *Batman: Arkham Knight* video game (2015), think of the slow-motion shots of the hero’s finishing moves, punching or kicking opponents into unconsciousness. The hero’s blows are a devastating climax that slows time to a crawl. Commenting on a scene in *The Batman* (2022), Fareed Ben-Youssef (2022) observes and asks as the hero pounds one of the Riddler’s followers, “[t]he usually taciturn Batman screams as he punches downwards—is this what a Dark Knight orgasm looks like? Can he feel ecstasy only when bone breaks beneath him? Such staging reveals that [Batman uses] violence, it seems, as an outlet for sexual feeling.” Whether in contemporary comics, video games, or films, in his encounters with villains, Batman offers little discussion, feeling, and intimacy: he prefers the ejaculative climax. Conversely, Wonder Woman often, though not always, exhibits compassion, mercy, and feeling towards her interlocutors (Johnson-Moxley 2017, 98). I use interlocutors here because her heroism is dialogue and caresses as much as it is fisticuffs and swordplay. Whether it is her fellow Amazons or her nemeses, she handles miscommunication, struggle, and agon with words and open arms.

Batman finds himself at odds with desiring-production. Batman seeks the end of desire, believed to be a lack of justice in the city, and to bring criminals, any criminals, to justice for the death of his parents. As I detail in the next sections, Wonder Woman’s desiring-production is endless: rather than crush her enemies, she will forge connections through dialogue and intimacy. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1977) language, Batman operates on a molar scale wherein justice is an abstraction yet is also quantifiable by the number of villains the hero can send to the hospital and then prison (283–90). One can imagine Batman keeping a running tally on the Bat-Computer, documenting how productive his avenging was in a given week, month, and year. The molar is in the realm of the orgasm while the molecular is like the caress. Wonder Woman seeks the molecular,

² For more on “sacred kink,” see Mueller (2018).

forming intimate bonds with friends, family, lovers, and even villains. What I see instead of the pursuit of an abstract “justice,” as per many heroes, is a character who fosters the flow of desire from one body to another. Diana is not (just) a pantheon of strength but knows her limits, espouses vulnerability over invulnerability, and practices affection over brutality. When desire flows, the result is something more akin to what is typically called love.

My analysis of a canonically queer superhero alongside Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy also connects to both queer theory and Fawaz and Scott’s observations about queerness and comics studies. To start, contemporary queer theorists have picked up Deleuze’s theories of the self as an alternative to the oft-cited theories of performativity articulated by Judith Butler (Colebrook 2009, 20). Deleuze recognizes the possibilities of going beyond the self, not as a transcendent capacity to perform against social norms and expectations, but as immanent expressions of desire. For Verena Andermatt Conley (2009), what is appealing about Deleuze’s work is the rethinking of desire beyond stable identities; indeed, “[t]o become gay has to do first and foremost not with identity but with desire” (26). Andermatt Conley continues, noting that “desire ... is not to long for something but to produce new ways of feeling, perceiving and conceiving. Gay people have to invent different ways of desiring that do not pre-exist” (26). This requires new utterances and new (writing) styles tailored to this alternative mode of existence. For Fawaz and Scott, comics are well suited to visually represent queerness.

Fawaz and Scott (2021) highlight three formal qualities of comics that render them queer. First, the “assumed immaturity of its audiences” fosters formal and narrative techniques that “elicit... attachments from perceived social delinquents, outcasts, and minorities” (173). Fans develop relationships with outsiders who are, perhaps, not unlike themselves. Second, comics are a “low-tech medium” (compared to Hollywood’s CGI blockbusters, for example). The creator(s) can write or draw anything imaginable on a page with no requirements for verisimilitude—whatever is there in the panel is there for the reader to believe, thus rendering them appropriate for fantasy worlds such as those in Wonder Woman comics (174). Finally, Fawaz and Scott note that comics’ seriality and sequential panels offer repetition with a difference:

Each iteration of an image, an issue, a story line, or a world has the potential to disrupt, comment upon, or altogether alter the flow and direction of what has come before: ... comics function ... as queer orientation devices, productively directing readers towards deviant bodies that refuse to be fixed in one image or frame, toward new desires for fantasy worlds that rebel against the constraints of everyday life. (175)

Earth One uproots Diana from the fantasy island of Themyscira and makes her an outcast. Further, Morrison and Paquette disrupt superhero comics conventions that mistake vigilante justice and violence for ethical superheroism. In doing so, they present a new take on superhero desires which, in turn, offers a new kind of superhero ethics.

3. SUBMITTING TO LOVING AUTHORITY

Since Wonder Woman possesses near physical invulnerability—a character trait that increased in the 2010s and brings her closer to figures like Superman and Thor (Cocca 2021, 27)—she cannot shed blood on the battlefield in the same way as other mortals and mutants and superpowered individuals (Bordun 2020, 351-352). Instead, she gifts her blood through emotional and physical vulnerability. In this section, I explore Wonder Woman’s ethics in Morrison and Paquette’s *Wonder Woman: Earth One* (2016). There, Diana deploys anecdotes about Man’s World and exhibits submission to her mother to “*change the world for the better.*”

Few comics authors rival Grant Morrison: they are “quite simply the most successful writer working in comics today” (Greene and Roddy 2015, 1).³ For Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy (2015), “[s]ince the 1980s, Morrison’s serialized superhero comics have defined and radically redefined the superhero archetype for our culture” (1). Morrison can accomplish such feats because of their “auteurist sensibility” and vast knowledge of superhero comics history (Singer 2012, 3; Greene and Roddy 2015, 1). Indeed, Morrison devotes a whole chapter to Wonder Woman’s early years in their 2011 study of American superhero comics (90–106), which makes them the perfect candidate for the authorship of one of the longest-running American superheroes.

Initially, Morrison penned the character in a 2008 event series entitled *Final Crisis*. In 2009, Morrison stated that they “‘always sensed something slightly bogus and troubling’ at the heart of the Wonder Woman concept. ... ‘When I dug into the roots of the character I found an uneasy *mélange* of girl power, bondage and disturbed sexuality that has never been adequately dealt with or fully processed out to my mind’” (qtd. in Brake 2017, 72). In *Final Crisis*, Diana becomes the “patient zero” of supervillain Darkseid’s Anti-Life Equation. Gone is her status as a feminist icon. Instead, she operates on the other side of Marston’s suppressed vision, i.e., as a kink icon: Darkseid controls Diana and she dons a bondage-style mask and outfit. According to Matthew William Brake (2017), Morrison’s portrayal of Wonder Woman here reflects their “negative feelings about the character” (72, 75).

By 2016, no doubt aided by the research and writing of their American superhero comics book published in 2011, Morrison changed their mind about Marston’s Wonder Woman. They observe, “The warrior woman thing is not what ... William Marston wanted, that’s not what he wanted at all! [Their] original concept for Wonder Woman was an answer to comics that [they] thought were filled with images of blood-curdling masculinity. ... Marston’s Diana was a doctor, a healer, a scientist” (qtd. in Brake 2017, 79). With the publication of *Wonder Woman: Earth One*, Morrison and artist Yanick Paquette return to the roots of the superheroine. In *Earth One*, Marston’s DISC theory is used as a trope for

³ Grant Morrison announced that they identify as non-binary in a 2021 interview (Anon).

developing character relationships and worldbuilding: in no less than seven panels in the 120-page comic, characters refer to the Amazonian code of submission to loving authority. But it is not merely homage, and several contemporary updates prompt ethical readings. In the first of their three-volume *Wonder Woman* series, Morrison and Paquette reveal not just Marston's intentions, but the onto-ethics espoused by Deleuze and Guattari and a more robust awareness of BDSM, communication, queerness, and comics violence. In *Earth One*, Diana's caress is an honest and open testimony about her experiences in Man's World alongside ongoing renewals of the Amazon code. She accomplishes this in explicit and direct terms—Diana's language touches her listeners.

Morrison and Paquette develop the theme—submitting to loving authority has positive ethical outcomes—in this reimagining of the Wonder Woman origin and young adulthood. I leave aside the changes the two creators have made to Diana's birth and parentage in favour of a close analysis of her meeting with Steve Trevor and expedition to Man's World. In the present, Diana has returned from her first trip outside the haven of Paradise Island. She must face the charge of consorting with Man's World. For more than 3000 years Themyscira cut itself off from Man's World and it had flourished. As Holiday Girl Beth Candy summarizes, in those three millennia, the Amazons developed “a *paradise island of science fiction lesbians ... with a side of bondage.*” Upon her return to that secluded island, Wonder Woman submits to the will of her mother, Queen Hippolyta who, wounded by Diana's choice of exile from Paradise Island, will not so easily forgive her daughter. But as Diana knows, one does not restore bonds with anger and violence but through language that caresses. Thus, Diana does not reluctantly stand trial; rather, Nubia observes, she does so “as if it was *her own desire.*” In the opening volume of *Earth One*, then, the narration is in flashback. In each act, characters tell a piece of the story of Diana's expedition, and the testimonies provide a better understanding of the hero's motivations to venture into Man's World.

First, Diana must submit to symbolic bondage. Since social and cultural understandings of BDSM changed dramatically between 1940 and 2015 (Scott 2015), Morrison and Paquette's depiction of Diana in bondage suggests more than a clever ploy on the part of the hero, as per Marston's comics. As Susanna Paasonen (2018) observes in representations of BDSM across twenty-first century media, trauma play or BDSM as a healing or therapeutic practice “has been rearticulated and circulated widely enough to be instantly recognizable, even if this connection is not something assumed by default” (106).⁴ Diana thus accepts appearing at the trial in chains to further her cause and begin to repair her relationships with lovers, family, and homeland. Here, the symbolic gesture demonstrates her willingness to yield to her mother and the Amazons. Diana, not unlike

⁴ Beckmann's (2009) interviewees also describe BDSM practices and the capacity for healing and transformation (218–22).

Superman in handcuffs in *Man of Steel* (2013), offers to be bound to allow the other to feel dominant. In this situation, then, Diana proclaims to her mother positioned high above on the palace mezzanine, “I come of my own free will, in submission to the *loving authority* of the Queen, my mother. I agreed to this *ordeal* because I know its outcome will *change the world for the better*.” Todd Klein’s lettering emphasizes Diana’s submission to her *loving mother* as well as the *ordeal*—of arrest, trial, and possible severe outcomes (Fig. 2). Willing submission not only puts the individual in a state of vulnerability but brings forth her interlocutor’s direct engagement with the ethical imperative of whether to act or not act. Morrison is echoing Marston’s contention that “matriarchal feminine love would save the world” (Berlatsky 2015, 152). Marston believed this because he articulated, and perhaps witnessed in his relationship with Olive and Elizabeth, the supposed superiority of sapphic love. He argued that women who have sex with women become better mothers (Berlatsky 2015, 148). Diana thus calls upon Hippolyta to respond to her pleas. Regarding Diana’s crimes and whether the Amazons should make efforts to improve women’s plight in Man’s World, Hippolyta must soon decide. Therefore, Diana submits: the utopia that is Themyscira must be extended to women everywhere.



Figure 2 Diana Prince pleads with her mother, with Todd Klein’s lettering emphasizing the addressee (a “*loving authority*”) and her experience (the “*ordeal*”) n.p. © DC Comics, 2016.

Standing trial then, Diana details the reasons for leaving Paradise Island with Lieutenant Steve Trevor of the US Air Force. In line with Marston’s original tale, except now the pilot is a Black man, Trevor’s plane crash lands on the beaches of Paradise Island. Paquette

does not neglect the erotic charge of Diana's first encounter with a man. In a two-page spread to mark the moment's importance, the left side of the page depicts a wounded Trevor emerging from the surf in ripped clothing. In the center of this spread, in a phallic and testicle-shaped insert panel, he falls face-first into the sand, while the right panel features Diana's shocked expression. The phallus makes an additional appearance five pages later. To treat his wounds, marking what Morrison called Marston's vision of the character as a healer, Diana brings Trevor to a nearby cave. Prior to treatment, however, because of the male novelty and her curiosity, she sexually assaults him: Diana grabs his groin, desire activated in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, and asks about his gender. He kindly requests that she remove her hand. Once Trevor's genitals are certified, Diana attempts to use the healing purple ray on the injured man, a medical device she used earlier to treat a deer. To Diana's disappointment, the device cannot heal men; only doctors in Man's World can bring Trevor back to full health.

In this not-very meet-cute moment between Amazon and American, Morrison reveals one of Diana's key traits. Maria Chavez, Chris Gavaler, and Nathaniel Goldberg (2017) position Wonder Woman's ethics within the feminist paradigm of the ethics of care, i.e., to care for others is to also care for oneself by strengthening human bonds. In Marston's tale, replicated in *Earth One*, Diana enacts the ethics of care through her attentiveness to Trevor's needs and responsibility for his well-being. She also knows her level of medical competence and she immediately responds to his injuries (Chavez, Gavaler, and Goldberg 2017, 192). In *Earth One*, to respond to these needs and get Trevor off-island, Diana must beat the reigning Amazonian champion Mala, who is also her lover, in the yearly festival battle reenacting Hercules's defeat at Amazonian hands. Usually, Diana plays Hercules in the event and Mala is easily victorious. However, Diana now refuses to play her role because she has a plan to save Trevor. Diana's superior strength leads her to an effortless victory over Mala, the latter made furious at this turn of events. This victory earns her the crown of Wonder Woman of Amazon and the newly minted Wonder Woman then claims a prize of her choosing, Mala's Swan Plane. For Trevor, Diana forsakes her lover, mother, and community. The ethics of care thus align with what I have called the ethics of the caress in Wonder Woman's contemporary iterations. Her sacrifice of home, friends, lovers, and family is the product of her upbringing on the "*island of science fiction lesbians*," as Beth candidly remarked. Her eventual love for Steve is not morally superior to that of her homeland, lovers, or mother; instead, she realizes that to save the one who needs saving, she must transgress the established Amazonian customs. She rescues Steve precisely because he is in danger of perishing. The Amazons will continue to thrive without her and, knowing her society participates in this ethics of care, she may find herself reunited with family and friends rather than forever exiled. Her return to Themyscira is, of course, not without difficulty.

Concerning Steve, Diana does not immediately pursue vigilante justice, seeking out those who have wounded him and bringing down a storm of violence upon them. Indeed, in another retelling of the story, one could imagine a comic fridging Steve, i.e., he serves no purpose except to die so that Diana has reason to do violence to others (Simone 1999). In *Earth One*, she forgoes the abstraction “justice” so that first, she can ensure Steve’s health, and second, so that she may create a bond with him. Indeed, in the DeleuzoGuattarian sense, Diana destabilizes her Amazonian identity, not believing in the either/or of sexual norms—she must be Mala’s same-sex lover or Steve’s opposite-sex lover—and she allows desire to flow from Mala to Steve (an entirely new and unknown experience for her), and then briefly to Artemis in volume three (Morrison and Paquette 2021). Back in volume one, as is the Amazonian custom, the hero tries to literalize her bond with Steve with a leather collar. Again, Morrison refers to Marston’s theory but with an update, showing its limitations without consent and understanding. Diana informs Steve, “To save a life is to be tied to that life. Know that I will take care of you and keep you from harm. But first—you must be willing to submit to *loving authority*. *Kneel* for we are bound.” Steve looks aghast at this collaring request— “a dominant gives a collar to a submissive to indicate that the submissive’s wellbeing is now her responsibility” (Chavez, Gavalier, and Goldberg 2017, 195–96)—and meets it with disapproval. But through this intimate act, Steve better understands the Amazon’s ethics of the caress.

This opening chapter of Diana’s testimony, delivered to her mother and fellow Amazons, posits communication as the means through which one restores broken bonds. More witnesses are called upon to provide their testimonies and come to Diana’s defense. The trial continues as Beth Candy and Steve tell the Amazons about Diana’s rescues and kindnesses, with the former noting she does not need the lasso to assist her in truthfully telling the story. The imperative to be truthful suggests that Beth and Steve grasp the necessity of submitting to the Queen’s loving authority. As they both detail, Wonder Woman consistently places diplomacy above violence during her brief stay in Man’s World. Even as Hippolyta sends the gorgon Medusa and the Amazon warriors to bring Diana back home, the latter will not put up a fight. In her decisive moments in Man’s World, surrounded by the Amazons tasked with the mission (including her lover Mala), Diana chooses to be bound and restrained outside of the hotel where she and Steve have taken up residence. Setting aside violence here parallels an earlier scene at the hospital where Diana had first brought the wounded man. There, the US Army bursts into the building to interrogate Steve about the discovery of Paradise Island (he denies knowledge about his exact whereabouts, worried that like his ancestors, Americans will harm peoples from other lands). Unimpressed with the Army men, Diana makes a mockery of their aggressive display, representative of Morrison’s mockery of comics authors’ overreliance on violent resolution: Diana lifts an Army jeep over her head as the frightened soldiers then stand down. She mutters to herself, “[in English:] Men. [in Themysciran:] So easily

impressed by feats of *strength*. By things they can *measure* and weigh. Leading brief, ignorant lives of fear and conflict. In this grim theater of death and anger.” Whether with the Army or the Amazons, Diana does not resort to violence or her muscles except when feats of strength will generate the conditions for diplomacy and communication.

While Diana’s message is commendable, Morrison and Paquette succumb to gendered comic book representations. In most comics, superpowered men have large, muscular bodies. However, as Aaron Taylor (qtd. in Kustritz 2020, 320) observes, Superman and Wonder Woman are both some of the strongest characters, yet the latter is not typically drawn as a world-class weightlifter. In *Earth One* for instance, when Diana meets Steve, the man is shirtless and his muscles and abs bulge as the comparatively slim Diana tends to his injuries. Later, when Diana lifts that jeep over her head, a close-up panel features not a bulging bicep but a moderately engaged, fit but not muscular arm. Anne Kustritz (2020) points out such incommensurable representations of superhero bodies:

female superheroes are not average women but rather literally superhuman women, representing the height of physical achievement. As such, ... their strength should logically appear on their bodies as visible muscle. However, ... even those female superheroes who are supposedly ... stronger than their male compatriots are not allowed to make that strength visible as muscle. (320)

It is difficult, then, to articulate Diana’s ethics without also discussing the material realities of the superheroes’ bodies. Her fit, feminine body seems like a better image for a peace figure than large, muscular dominants such as Batman.

While Wonder Woman’s ethics means using violence only as a last resort, from Marston through to the present, one could argue that her ethics “could also be seen as embodying learned feminist values that anyone can practice” (Cocca 2021, 64). This is particularly strong in a key scene in *Earth One*. Diana laments the loss of so many women when she stumbles into the women’s wing of the hospital. Distraught, she proclaims to a nurse that “sisters [are] *dying* [and t]heir lives, their wisdom -- *lost forever*, unrecorded.” So many deaths could be avoided with the healing purple ray, she observes. At the side of an elderly woman, Diana offers a touch of condolence in this person’s last moments (Fig. 3). “Condolence” means an expression of sympathy, especially when there is the death of a family member or close friend (Stevenson 2010). But the word “condolences” is often used to tautologically express condolences (“My condolences...”), leaving an ontological distance between the grieving person and the one expressing their sympathies. In the late 16th century, “condolence” emerged from the Christian Latin “*condole*.” Here we are closer to a sentiment: *condolere*, *con-* meaning “with” and *dolere* meaning “grieve, suffer” (2010). Condole is therefore to grieve and suffer with another and true condolences are the expressions and gestures by which we grieve and suffer with another. Condolences are not empty but, etymologically, they house the possibility of intimate communication between and among individuals. This form of communication

requires recognition of mortality, an experience Diana shares with the elderly woman. When we anxiously sob over the facticity of a person’s mortality, we communicate the morality of beings, and for Alphonso Lingis (1994), when we extend a hand to touch another person in their dying, their pain is no longer theirs alone (179). Indeed, Diana accompanies the dying woman into her eternal slumber. A few kind words and intimacy provide the dying woman with a peaceful end. She is no angel, however, and we can recall Diana’s remark in Marston and Peter’s 1942 *Sensation Comics* #2 noted above (“What’s an angel? I think I’d rather be a woman” [2016, 40–41]) and here suggest it may be better to have Diana say, for this scene in *Earth One*, “I think I’d rather be a mortal.” To be an ethical person, here in this hospital’s women’s wing, is to offer a caress and a touch of condolence.

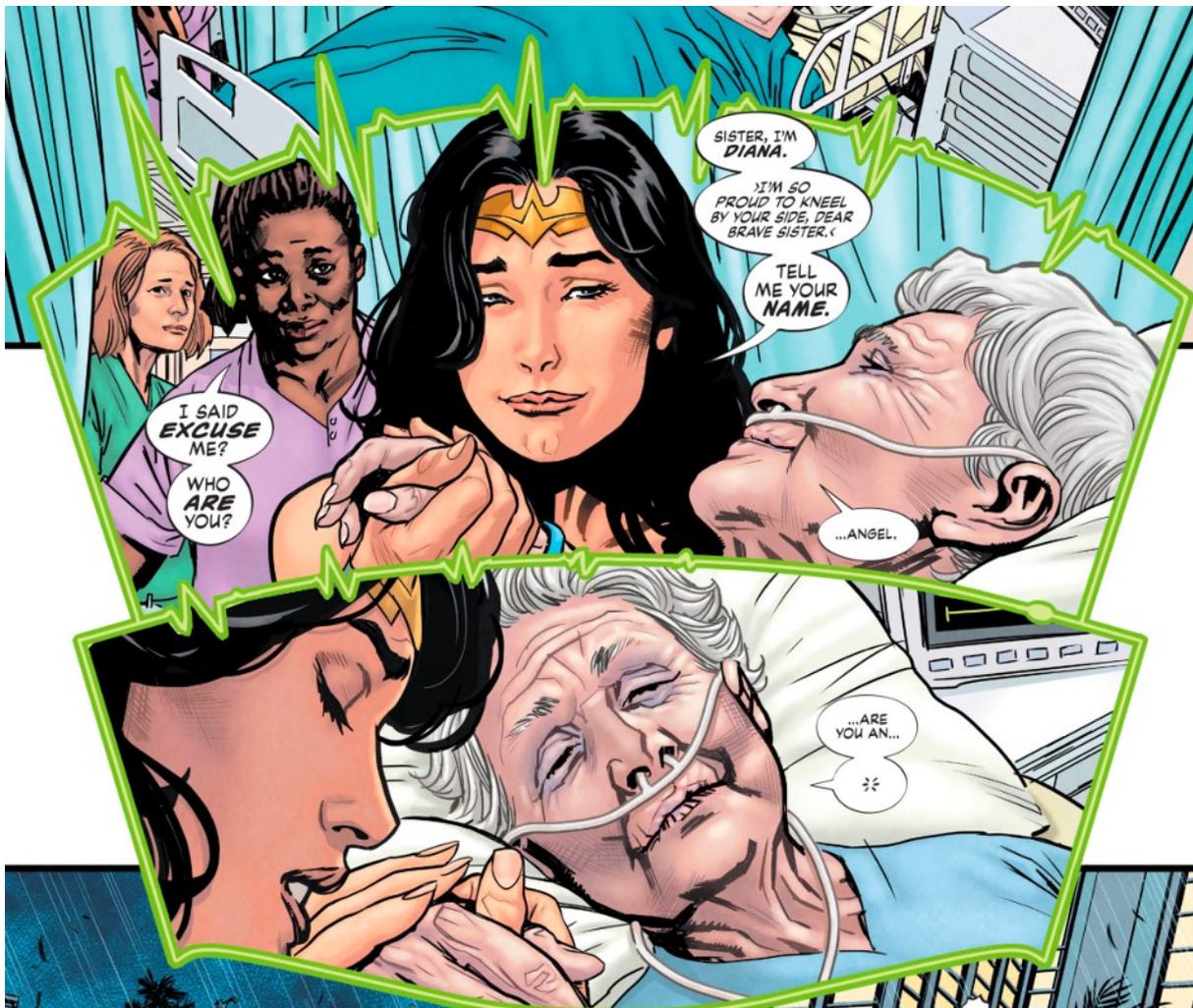


Figure 3 Diana’s touch of condolence. *Wonder Woman: Earth One, Volume 1*, Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette, n.p. © DC Comics, 2016.

Frustrated at the lack of care for the hospitalized women, Diana barges in on the Army officials’ interrogation of Trevor and delivers a stern message: “Women are in pain,

enslaved, broken, and deformed in your mad world. But we [Amazons] can *lead* you out of the more. You men only have to *stop*—and to *kneel*. This broken *Man's World* must submit to the merciful authority of the *Wonder Women of Amazonia*. Then all will be well. Trust me.” Just as she consents to be bound and to submit to her mother and community, Diana hopes others submit to her loving authority so that she may respond to the ethical imperative: men only need to kneel and ask for help because Amazonia has the spirit, morality, and technology to mend Man’s broken world. Thus, Morrison and Paquette have rekindled the other side of Diana’s superpowers, largely forgotten by authors after Marston’s run. She impresses not by her strength alone. As Tobienne Jr. (2017) observes, “Wonder Woman more than any other superhero is as comfortable in negotiations as she is in combat. ... Through her possession of wisdom and love, of *sophia* and *philia*, through her pathos, she is able to bring others to submit to her loving authority, not through force alone, but through persuasion” (138, 139). The person living by the ethics of the caress is a philosopher in the original sense.

“Submit to loving authority” firmly posits one party in a state of vulnerability such that the other party can enact the ethics of the caress. According to Diana, this is what Man’s World needs, an acknowledgement of vulnerability and a little help from a superior society. What Morrison and Paquette’s graphic novel articulates is that not only can the ethics of the caress be a literal touch, but it can also be a direct and intimate language. An ethics of the caress requires a form of communication that allows individuals to express themselves in words, but these words are dynamic: the Amazonian code of willing submission to loving authority must not be enacted in a top-down manner, as in a person demands compliance from a vulnerable individual; rather, it necessitates a willingness to yield and demonstrate vulnerability. This is Diana’s goal when she returns to ask her mother for help: the world is a mess and only the Amazons can clean it up.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Diana not only exhibits a deep understanding of her strength, recognizes the power of vulnerability, and practices affection over brutality, but also sparks ethical behaviours in the people around her through her choices. Whether it is the US Army, fellow warriors, or her mother, Wonder Woman is committed to these ethical imperatives, and the ethics of the caress—in the form of the literal caress as well as through intimate communication—transforms superheroism from hyper-violence to compassionate acts. The Wonder Woman authors closest to Marston’s vision reserve the term “superhero” not only for an exhibition of overpowering others with feats of strength but of forging new connections among what were once individuals in opposition. For desiring-machines and desire-production, no individuals are incompatible—they find that force, that caress, that kind word, to bring them together.

Second-wave liberal feminist Gloria Steinem (1995) points to Wonder Woman’s real power: “The lesson [of Wonder Woman] was that each of us might have unknown powers within us, if we only believed and practiced them” (7). To bring together opposing parties or offer open arms for a hug, the DeleuzoGuattarian superhero takes a bold first step with a connection through language and touch; the attainment of a transcendent goal is out of Diana’s hands—all she has is the immanence of literal and figurative touch. Verbal language may sometimes fall short. Instead, in our sobs, tears, and hugs, no words are needed to console, and in other contexts, laughter may bring individuals closer than any string of sentences can (Lingis 2000, 93, 95). Language is decentered. When two friends or lovers or villains are fused, limbs around limbs, they speak in a pattern, rhythm, and slang only they understand. Wonder Woman not only indicates her willing submission and suggests others do the same, but she also speaks with physical affection. For Diana, immanence, desire, and what I have called the ethics of the caress are shared. Only for individuals ready to lovingly submit to one another, “of loving without remembering, without phantasm and without interpretation” (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 47), is it possible to cuddle and communicate with the intensity of an orgasm. Only for individuals ready to lovingly submit to one another without vigilantism is it possible to end the fascist reign of the superhero as judge, jury, and executioner of a solipsistic justice. For Wonder Woman, love means attending to the other in their highs and lows, in their rages and sorrows, and as one ready to mutually cooperate in the ethics of the caress.

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