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This study examined American comic book superheroines from the past and present, following trends in their portrayal throughout the past sixty years.

Three randomly selected comic books introducing or featuring super-heroic women were subjected to a pictorial cover analysis. This cover analysis was intended to analyze comic book cover art to determine how superheroines have been presented to readers over the last six decades.

The women who succeed in comic books are usually strong characters to start with, but the way they are portrayed often devalues or diminishes their strength. Depictions of superheroines in comic books often pander to adolescent male fantasies, but the introduction of new super-powered characters provides hope for the future.

Headings:

Comic books, strips, etc.

Comic books, strips, etc. -- Women.

Comic books, strips, etc. -- Evaluation.

Women in literature.

*BUST*ING OUT ALL OVER: THE PORTRAYAL OF SUPERHEROINES IN AMERICAN SUPERHERO COMICS FROM THE 1940s TO THE 2000s

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Approved by:

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Introduction

Dinah stretched with a sigh, then shimmied into her fishnet tights. A black satin teddy came next, which she belted with a matching sash. She shrugged into a short blue bolero jacket, and tugged on her high-heeled jackboots. A small bird-shaped charm twinkled from a black band that she fastened around her neck. Finally, she smoothed back her own long black hair and pulled on a wavy blonde wig, fastening it securely in place. Ready at last, Dinah raced down the stairs, hopped on her motorcycle, and took off for work in a flurry of gravel and road dust.

What kind of work required fishnet hose, high heels, and a satin teddy? Was she a cocktail waitress? An exotic dancer? A blackjack dealer? A prostitute? No. Dinah Drake, also known as the Black Canary, was a crime-fighting superheroine.

Created in 1947 for DC Comics, the Black Canary eventually proved so popular that she replaced Johnny Thunder as the main character in his feature story. In fact, she was apparently so popular that she was brought back and modernized forty-five years later. She was a strong and believable character. She was a stuntwoman who rode a motorcycle. She was a superheroine. And I had never even heard of her.

I had never read comic books when I was younger, yet I could rattle off the names of at least ten superhero tough-guys without pausing. But when it came to superheroines I was stumped. Sure there was Wonder Woman, and there were some women on the X-Men team. But other than that, the only female comic book characters I could think of

were the girlfriends and relations of the superheroes. Of the few superheroines that I could think of, not one wore what I could consider a sensible outfit for fighting crime. Out of curiosity, I went to a local comic shop and browsed the selection of new titles. I was surprised first by how many titles there were, then by how many featured women on the covers, and most especially by how those women, like the Black Canary, seemed ill-dressed for an action-oriented career like fighting crime. Many of them sounded like they would be fierce and tough women, with titles like *Avengylene*, *Fatale*, and *Razor*, but looking at the covers revealed that most of these super-women were posed gracefully on the covers in their skimpy costumes, not really *doing* anything at all. Were these superheroines supposed to appeal to girls? It was then that I noticed that, though it was a very busy Saturday morning and there were at least thirty people of various ages from eight to thirty-eight around, I was the only female in the entire shop.

As I looked into the backgrounds and stories of some of those superheroines of today, I found that many had their roots in comic books of the past. In looking at the image of these super-women, I wondered whether and how they had changed from their origins, and if external or societal factors had influenced their portrayal in comic books. This study will examine American comic book superheroines from the past and present, following trends in their portrayal throughout the decades.

Background

Prehistoric man did it on the walls of a cave. Egyptians did it inside tombs. Ancient Greeks did it on pots. Pre-Columbian people did it on screens. Early Medieval women did it in crewel, while monks did it in the margins. People all over the world have been doing it for centuries: telling stories through pictures. Creating comics.

In order to explore more fully the portrayal of superheroines in comic books, there must be an understanding of what 'comics' are, and a brief history of comic books. Will Eisner, master artist and comic veteran, describes comics as "sequential art." A picture is just a picture when viewed by itself, but when placed with other pictures as part of a sequence, the two images together become something more- the art of comics. Artist Scott McCloud makes the definition a bit more specific and defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 9). Both artists emphasize the fact that comics are more than mere pictures and that much of the 'reading' of comics takes place in the reader's mind rather than explicitly on the page.

Though comic strips first appeared in America in 1892, the first true American comic book did not appear until 1933. As the Depression passed, manufacturers looked for new ways to market their products, and started using compilations of reprinted comic strips as premiums in grocery stores. One of the first was called *Funnies on Parade,* and was given away with Proctor and Gamble soap products. The first run of copies was gone

within weeks. Perry and Aldridge explain how the comic book finally came into its own. "As an experiment one of them, *Famous Funnies*, was put on a news-stand with a ten-cent price sticker on its cover. It sold out at once" (Perry and Aldridge, 155), and the popularity of the comic book was sealed.

Five years later, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster finally managed to interest *Action Comics* in their creation: the man of steel, otherwise known as Superman. Superman quickly became one of the most prominent characters in modern mythology. Shortly after in 1939, Batman fluttered onto the scene in *Detective Comics*. The introduction of these new superheroes helped to shape the future of the comic book genre, and even now many people think of 'superheroes' and 'comic books' as synonymous. Superman and Batman were only the beginning, and were quickly joined by The Flash, Sub-Mariner, Hawkman, and countless others. The new superheroes left America to join the war effort, before the United States had even entered World War II, and acted as symbols "of a new patriotic faith" (Perry and Aldridge, 156). In their patriotic costumes, touting the ideals of truth, justice, and the American way, these 'men of steel' were an enormous hit with the servicemen. After the war, superheroes had no more Nazis to fight, so many turned to aliens, monsters, and mad scientists. The fame of the superhero faded. The popularity of crime and horror comic books was on the rise, but so were the 'funny animal comics' *(Scrooge McDuck, Mighty Mouse, Lady & The Tramp*, etc.), the retellings of great literary masterpieces, and Bible stories.

In 1954, the loudest and most influential anti-comic book spokesman, the German-born psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, wrote a book called the *Seduction of the Innocent*. In this book, Wertham purportedly found a link between reading comic books

and juvenile delinquency. Though the book was blasted at the time for faulty reasoning and misuse of the scientific method, as Trina Robbins notes, "whereas it was certainly true, as Wertham stated, that the vast majority of young criminals he studied were avid comic book readers, he neglected to mention that the vast majority of American children were avid comic book readers" (Robbins, 103). His study had tremendous impact on the American public- so tremendous an impact in fact, that a Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency was formed to look into the problem. Many comic book companies were forced to close down when concerned parents all across America put a stop to their children's purchases. Though the Senate exonerated comic books, in an attempt to reassure the American public of the relative safety of comic books, the industry put together a committee to regulate itself: the Comics Code Authority (CCA).

The Comics Code Authority dictated what was acceptable in comic books, and required that all material intended for publication in a comic book be submitted to the Authority for advance review and judgment (Goldwater, 18). Comic books that passed the review received the stamp of approval, which was displayed on the cover. Already weakened by the failing market and Wertham's accusations, the Comics Code crushed several of the remaining comic companies. EC Comics was one of the hardest hit. When the popularity of superheroes faded, EC had stayed on top of the market by switching to crime and horror comics- *Tales of the Crypt* was one of their most popular titles. As Steve Duin and Mike Richardson explained, "many of the provisions of the Comics Code seemed aimed directly at EC Comics: "No comic magazine shall use the word 'horror' or 'terror' in its title…" "Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with, the walking dead, torture,

vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited"" (Duin and Richardson, 92). Additional standards in the Code prohibited the use of slang and profanity, the depiction of drug use, the display of nudity or sexual situations, and so on. All told, there were nearly fifty restrictions imposed on both editorial matter and advertisements contained within the covers of the comic books. Every book had to be submitted to and accepted by the Authority, or it would not be published. By the end of the fifties, most of the smaller publishing houses shut their doors- or following EC Comics' lead, transferred to another format (namely magazines). This left the field clear for the two largest publishers: DC and Marvel.

The Comics Code is still the object of many debates. Marvel comics made headlines in 1971 when the CCA refused to approve several issues of *Amazing Spider Man*. Today, many comic book companies completely disregard the Comics Code- a great step forward according to some of the industry's writers. Frank Miller, who contributed significantly to the revival of the superhero industry, in 1994 was quoted by Duin and Richardson:

> The Comics Code never helped anybody who was worth a damn. It was nothing but a vicious, cowardly attempt to put the best publisher in comics history out of business. We've been stuck with that wretched, dumb-as-a-brick Code for decades… all because a pack of lousy publishers couldn't compete with William M. Gaines [head of EC Comics] 40 years ago. You bet it has stopped good comics from being published, and not to protect children. That's never been the purpose of the Comics Code. I've worked under the Code. I know…(Duin and Richardson, 92).

Many comic book publishers today have devised other rating systems that often appear on the covers. There are those that have ratings similar to movie ratings (G for general audiences, PG for parental guidance, R for restricted). Some have markings like video games (E for everyone, T for teens, M for mature audiences). Others simply

possess labels like “For Mature Readers.” There are even some that still sport the CCA stamp. Even more will show the CCA stamp on one issue, but perhaps not on the next. Then there are those that include no ratings at all. It is interesting to note that, whereas in the early days of the Code the CCA approval stamp was at least an inch tall and was located prominently on the cover, the stamps have steadily shrunk in size over the years, and today are barely a quarter of the original size. If they are present at all, they are often hidden within the cover art. The portrayal of women and superheroines in comic books as it relates to the Comics Code is particularly interesting, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Illustration of the ‘Decreasing’ Presence of the Comics Code Authority

Superman	*Batman*	*Adventure Comics*	*Red Sonja*	*Secret Origins*	*Supergirl*	*Hellcat*
1958	1967	1972	1976	1990	1994	2000

There’s A History of Women in Comic Books?

The first comic books, those compilations of funny newspaper comics, were popular with readers of both sexes. When Superman arrived in 1938, whispers of war were on the wind, and within a few years the United States engaged in World War II. Trina Robbins notes that during this time, superheroes punched their way through evil on the pages of the comic books. “Aside from their brightly colored longjohns, the one thing these heroes had in common was their gender,” Robbins continues, noting that in 1940, the first in a long line of short-lived costumed heroines arrived on the scene (Robbins, 3). The Woman in Red, a policewoman who donned a red cape and mask to fight crime,

appeared periodically in *Thrilling Comics*, but unlike most of her male counterparts of the time, she never received her own title. Robbins sums up the role of superheroines in the early comic books:

> This was the plight of most comic book action heroines. None had ever appeared in her own book, and they were invariably short-lived, rarely lasting for more than three appearances before fading into permanent obscurity. Often they were merely sidekicks of the more important male hero. For the most part, when women appeared in comics they were relegated to the role of girlfriend, and their purpose was to be rescued by the hero (Robbins, 3).

Though there were plenty of women in the early comic books, their portrayal as superheroes was less than impressive. But do women even need superheroes? Do men for that matter? A bit of exploration on the purpose and history of superheroes may help to clarify these questions.

What is it that makes a superhero? Dictionary definitions usually state that a superhero exhibits extraordinary, 'super-human' powers and is depicted as fighting evil. In 1992 Richard Reynolds wrote about some specific rules of superhero-dom. Firstly, heroes had to be separated from their parents. Heroes were to have some sort of special powers or abilities. They were supposed to be extraordinary people in an ordinary world, yet also have a mundane alter ego so that they could fit into the ordinary. They were devoted to justice and the law and were filled with patriotism and loyalty. Their stories were to be of mythical proportions that created a sense of wonder in readers (Reynolds, 12-16). If this definition is accepted, then there have been superhero figures throughout history. Gilgamesh, Hercules, Hippolyta, Beowulf, Cuchulainn, and others have been superheroes to the people of their respective cultures for centuries. Emily Alward describes the reasons for the popularity of superheroes today quite well:

> Humanity has always been fascinated by beings with supernatural powers… it may even be that superheroes are especially needed by our age. The 19th century's science and rationalism brought the demise of literal belief in religious supernaturalism. Events of the 20th century have further aided us to end our belief in human perfectibility. It is somehow heartening to suspend one's doubts, if only for the short period of time it takes to read a comic book, and to believe in powerful individuals who defeat evil through their own strength and benevolence (Alward, 33).

If such is true, then it stands to reason that women would be just as interested in superheroes as men. But in her article in 1982, Alward notes that "superhero fans are predominantly, though certainly not exclusively male. Superheroes also outnumber superheroines approximately 4-1" (Alward, 34). The milieu of superheroes for the last seventy years or so has been the comic book. In fact, Stan Lee (the man behind various successes at Marvel Comics) sees superhero fantasies as filling the role that faerie tales, legends, myths, and romances once filled (Perry, 161). Yet apparently there are large populations of women who simply do not read comic books. Why is this?

One of the main reasons for this may also be the single largest bone of contention between female readers and the comic book producers- whether superheroines are supposed to be role models or sex objects. In 1941, William Moulton Marston (the inventor of the lie detector) created a superheroine intended to be a role model. Wonder Woman was supposed to epitomize feminine strength and beauty. Two years later in an article for *The American Scholar* he wrote of the reasoning that went into his creation:

> It seemed to me, from a psychological angle, that the comics worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity… It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous, but it's sissified, according to exclusively male rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. 'Aw, that's girl stuff!' snorts our young comics reader, 'Who wants to be a girl?' And that's the point: not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength… Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weak ones (Marston, 1943).

Wonder Woman was intended to be an ideal role model for girls- a highly trained Amazon straight out of Greek mythology (except for the traditional Amazon removal of a breast for increased ease in archery). She embodied beauty, grace, strength, and femininity. After U.S. officer Steve Trevor crashed his airplane on Paradise Island, he was rescued and nursed back to health by Princess Diana, who then fell in love with him and, in her alter-ego guise of nurse Diana Prince, took him back to America, where she stayed to fight injustice as Wonder Woman. In her origins in 1941, Wonder Woman was realistic. She had no real superpowers, just superb training and nifty gadgets. She was a realistic looking woman, with realistic proportions, somewhere along the slim lines of an Olympic swimmer. (Wonder Woman's recent artists have completely reworked her appearance, as will be illustrated later.) She rarely hurt anyone and was more interested in reforming criminals than in punishing them. Yet if Wonder Woman was truly intended only to be a role model to young girls, why was she fighting injustice in a gold bustier, short shorts, and high-heeled boots?

Literature Review

In an article entitled 'Women in Comics' written for *Serials Review*, librarian Michael Lavin points out that readers of both sexes look for "good stories well told, new ideas, interesting character development, and strong art work… nor should it be too much to ask to see female characters portrayed in a realistic manner"(Lavin, 93). In the early days of comic book superheroes, women often played second fiddle to the real heroes. Most of the prevalent literature posted on the internet seems to focus on the ideas that superheroines in comic books are only present to encourage purchases by adolescent boys, that their figures and costumes are demeaning to women, and that the women who are portrayed are usually helpless victims, waiting to be saved by the real hero. There is a great deal of truth in these statements. Lois Lane, Superman's perennial girlfriend, was a tough career woman- but somehow always needed to be rescued when Superman was around. In the 1970s Lois was given her own comic so that she could be a model character for girls, but it was titled *SUPERMAN'S GIRLFRIEND Lois Lane*. Too often women in comic books were used as plot devices, expendable characters used to bump flagging sales (see Gwen Stacy's death in Spiderman's strong arms), or to create new superheroes powered by a thirst for revenge (Batman, Spawn). Lavin continues, writing that even super-powered females were defined by their relationships to men: "Mary Marvel was Captain Marvel's sister and Namora was the Sub-Mariner's cousin. Supergirl… was Superman's cousin" (Lavin, 94). Catman also had his super-niece, the

Kitten. The Star Spangled Kid had a little super-sister, Merry the Gimmick Girl. Hawkman was accompanied by his super-wife, Hawkgirl. Often, these superheroines were merely minor versions of the superheroes, having similar powers (never quite as powerful as the men's of course) and skimpier, sexier costumes. Some of the superheroines were too weak to even use what powers they had, or were simply unable to control them. In a 1942 story in *Wonderworld* comics quoted by Trina Robbins, Flame Girl (who can burst into flame at will) is admonished by The Flame as he stands by her hospital bed: "Thank heavens Linda, the doctor says your sight will be saved, but you must promise never to use your flame power again! You are not strong enough to control it, and I could never bear to lose you!" (Robbins, 52). The Invisible Girl, Ms. Marvel, Jean Grey and Rogue of the X-Men, and many other superheroine characters have struggled for years with being able to control their powers. Being unable to use the powers that make these superheroines 'super,' effectively reduced them to either 'damsel in distress' or 'eye candy' roles.

There are a number of scholars who have explored the relationship between women and the comics. Maurice Horn, author of numerous books on comics and comic art, has written a book entitled *Women In The Comics*. First written in the 1970s, the book came at a time when the comics were receiving growing recognition as an art form and during the height of the women's movement. Though Horn's book does focus on women, his study is "of woman as perceived through the comics, not an exhaustive inquiry into the medium's treatment of women and its effect on the culture at large" (Horn, 1). His book focuses primarily on comic strips, but does discuss comic book women at times. The book is divided roughly into decades, and his study focused

predominantly on American comic books and strips, for as Horn notes, "American production has been both the most numerous over the years and the most archetypal (as evidenced by its worldwide acceptance)" (Horn, 1). He continues to mention that the image of women projected by the comics was created *by* men, *for* men, and that is the most grievous and valid objection of female critics (Horn, 9). He writes, "that women have much to deplore (as well as a few things to cheer about) in the comics is obvious to anyone with more than passing interest in the subject… There is no question that some comics have catered to specific male sexual fantasies…" (Horn, 10). It is the portrayal of women, the "much to deplore" and the "few things to cheer about," that will be discussed further in this paper.

In 1995, Amy Nyberg wrote a description of the relationship between female readers and comic books. She notes that the average readers of comic books are twenty year old males, and that 95% of the comic reading population is male. In her article, she examines the remaining 5%- the women who read comic books. What she found was that women do not buy superhero comics and that even titles featuring female superheroes were intended for male audiences (Nyberg, 208). Working with a group of female comic book readers, she explains that the women were offended by the way women are depicted in some titles, and that many were discouraged from reading comic books simply through the way in which they are distributed. For her study, Nyberg solicited the opinions of marketing representatives from Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse Comics, three of the most predominant publishers of comic books.

Jordan J. Titus explores the world of the "dangerous-feminine" in the "bad girl" comics. The comic industry had been limping along during the early nineties, but later

years brought a new popularity- perhaps due in part to the "bad girl" comics. These bad girls were angels and devils, assassins and nuns, and served to revive flagging sales, usually by violently slashing their way through adventures while wearing little more than a smile and spike-heeled boots. In an article for *Forbes*, R. Lee Sullivan agrees:

> Bad girl comics are booming. While American standards of literacy are dropping, college students still seem able to handle comics, especially when the cartoons show busty viragoes with names like Lady Death, Barb Wire and Avengylene. Batman in a bustier; Captain America in a camisole (Sullivan, 37).

Trina Robbins, often named the foremost authority on women and comics, traces the introduction and development of many female superheroines in her work, *The Great Women Superheroes*. Robbins analyzes the good and the bad of comic book superheroines and villainesses, telling their stories and the history behind them. The concentration of the book is on the heroines of the Golden Age (the period of comic book publishing from the 1930s to the 1950s), as she explores the new characters provided as powerful role models for female readers.

There are others who have written on various aspects of the 'women in comics' theme as well. Sarah Corley describes the discrimination and exploitation of women in comics and comic books in great detail, yet aside from a single mention of Wonder Woman, does not mention the superhero comics at all. Susan Wood Glicksohn, the author of *Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch,* breaks down the roles of Marvel heroines into two categories: The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch. The Poison Maiden is the perfect, pure, inaccessible, princess, while the Great Bitch is the deadly female, clever, dishonest and dangerous. Known in literature as the Madonna / Whore dichotomy, both halves make up womanhood. Glicksohn declares that the main female characters in Marvel stories exist solely to give depth to the male hero, and states that "the only liberal cause

consistently ridiculed, or, at best, trivialized, is the women's movement" (Glicksohn, 7). She also notes that many superheroines and villainesses are diminutive counterparts to more powerful male characters. Thomas J. Young also conducted a survey of Marvel superheroines, wherein he found that women were "the weaker sex" in the Marvel Universe. Kenneth Adams discusses the role of male-female relationships in comic books. Many scholars have written on the many roles of super-heroic women in comic books, but none seems to focus specifically on the images of superheroines that are presented to readers. How are women portrayed in American superhero comics, and how has that portrayal changed since the introduction of superheroines in 1940? This study examines superheroines throughout the decades in an attempt to find the answers to these and other questions that arose along the way.

Methodology

Because comic books rely predominantly upon illustration to tell a story, the artwork of the comic is extremely important, and as such often influences whether or not a reader will purchase the book. Comic books also are not generally carried by libraries and are seldom sold in corner stores any more. Often then, the only place left to purchase comic books is through the specialized shop or through direct purchase catalogs. In comic book shops, the books are often sold in sealed bags, and the distribution catalogs usually show cover illustrations. Both of these methods focus even greater attention on the cover illustrations. The judgment a reader places on the comic book art can determine whether or not the book is purchased, and the books that are purchased in turn influence what the companies publish. Splashy cover art can make the difference between a purchase and a browse, even though the cover art sometimes does not reflect the story within. This exercise was intended to analyze comic book cover art to see how superheroines have been presented to readers over the last sixty years.

In order to create a more manageable data set, certain criteria were imposed on the comic book characters used for this study. Because of potential difficulties arising from cultural and language issues, this study focuses exclusively on American comic books. Superheroines, for the purposes of this paper, are limited to those comic book heroines who either wear costumes, have secret identities, or use special abilities or powers. By these definitions, there were at least four hundred superheroines that still

qualified for study, so the field was further restricted to those superheroines who, at some point, were featured in their own series of comic books. Although women have also made phenomenal villainesses in the comic book world, they seldom received their own titles. For this reason, super-villainesses have also been excluded (with the notable exceptions of Catwoman and Lady Death, each of whom have had their moments of goodness or may be viewed as anti-heroines rather than villainesses.)

A true effort was made to abide by these parameters, but the lack of a definitive and comprehensive list detailing the origins, appearances, deaths, and rebirths of all comic book superheroines may have resulted in a divergence from the aforementioned parameters. This study uses pictorial analysis to determine the prevalent elements in the portrayal of superheroines as depicted on comic book covers.

The selection process:

- A list of superheroines was compiled, making extensive use of the *Fangirl*, *Superwomen*, *Marvel Entertainment*, *Chaos! Comics*, *Image Comics*, and *Dark Horse Comics* websites, and DC Comics*' Who's Who* character directory.
- The superheroines were sorted into lists according to the decade in which each first appeared or was introduced.
- Those superheroines who did not (at some point) have their own title series were discarded.
- The remaining superheroines for each decade were shuffled and then assigned a number (beginning with 1 and ending with the number of eligible superheroines in that decade).

- An online random number generator was used to select three random numbers for each decade (http://www.random.org).
- The corresponding three superheroines provided the basis for cover analysis for their decade.
- This process was repeated for superheroines of each decade from 1940 to 2000, with the exception of 1950, when only three superheroines were introduced- only one of which eventually got her own title.

The evaluation process:

- For each randomly selected superheroine of the given decade, an attempt was made to find one of the first few comic book issues in which that heroine appeared. It was thought that by examining one of the first few issues, the creator's original intent in the creation of the character would be intact- what she was to look like, what powers she was to have, what her personality was supposed to be, etc. In addition, by using earlier issues, it was more likely that the original artist was the one illustrating the character (as artists often change quite frequently in the comic books world)
- The previously selected comic book covers then served as the data for analysis in determining the portrayal of superheroines in comic books.
- The cover of each selected issue was coded using the Cover Art Index (adapted with permission from "The Bad Girl Art (BGA) Index v0.2") by Dave Van Domelen.
- In order to guarantee inter-rater reliability, the covers were also coded by two additional coders.
- A list of data was compiled.

Data Analysis

This section includes a brief description of each randomly selected superheroine, and details the data collected from indexing the covers. Charts detailing data from the indexed covers are presented in the Appendix. Data are sorted according to the decade in which the superheroine first appeared. The number of 'x' marks in a given category indicates the number of coders who recorded a given characteristic.

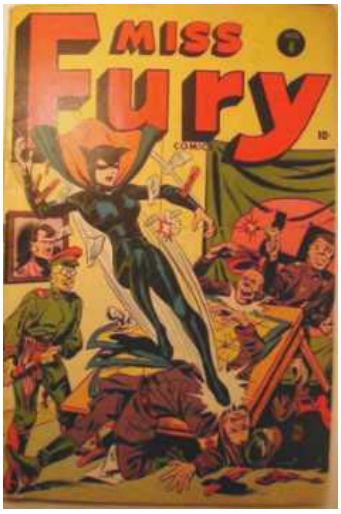
The 1940s

Miss Fury, the Phantom Lady, and the Blonde Phantom were the randomly selected heroines of the 1940s.

Miss Fury was the first true superheroine in the comics. Created by Tarpe Mills (a female artist) in 1941, Miss Fury was the alter ego of wealthy Brazilian socialite Marla Drake who, upon finding out that another woman would be wearing the same costume, put on a panther skin (later discovered to be cursed) sent to her by an adventuring Uncle. The panther skin fit like a glove, and soon Miss Fury was battling Nazi spies and mad scientists in Brazil. Her new cat suit granted her the claws and agility of a panther and a tail that could be used as a whip. Though she started off in comic strips, Miss Fury soon made the slide into comic books. The comic books were apparently intended for a female audience, as issue #4 included a page of paper dolls. By selling more than a million copies during the war, Miss Fury had taken America by storm. A poll taken showed that

one hundred percent of men and ninety percent of women were fans of the cat-suited heroine (Robbins, 21). Miss Fury was apparently popular enough that she was brought back in 1991 by *Adventure Comics*.

Prominently featured on the cover of 1944's *Miss Fury* #4 in her panther suit,



Miss Fury is in charge, knocking Nazis to the ground with a great deal of force. The form-fitting suit apparently offers ease of movement- a must when trouncing Nazi officers, and its cursed properties allow her to go about with the padded feet of a panther, which is conducive to the martial arts style fighting that she appears to prefer. Though the cat suit covers her head to toe, both coders noted and wondered at the small (and useless?) cape trailing behind her. She is obviously fighting evil, and appears fully capable of handling herself.

A few months after Miss Fury appeared, the Phantom Lady made her debut. Sandra Knight was a pampered socialite, the daughter of a Senator who fought crime under the guise of the Phantom Lady. Added as a filler strip in the 1941 introduction of *Police Comics*, the mysterious Phantom Lady vanished for a while, only to be brought back into popularity by Matt Baker in 1946. Matt Baker, considered by many to be the king of the 'good girl' artists, kept the basics of the superheroine, but changed the colors of the Phantom Lady's original outfit from green and yellow to the more patriotic red and blue. Trina Robbins explains the lady's popularity: "Baker's women were drawn to appeal to men… they also appealed strongly to a female audience. His dashing and glamorous women have a kind of forties movie star appeal" (Robbins, 72). Although her

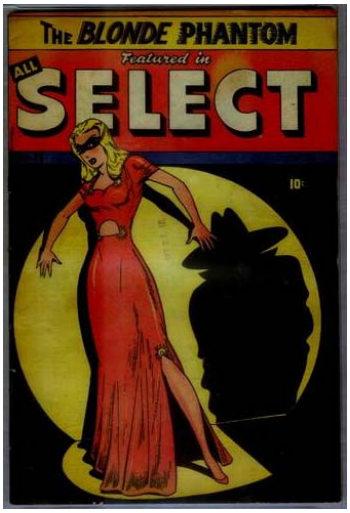
costume did not cover her face (or much else for that matter), in the tradition of superheroes nobody ever recognized her. Her weapon was a black light ray that would shroud the focus of its beam in darkness, and her athletic prowess got her out of many a tight spot- a fortunate thing, as she seemed to get tied up quite frequently. The Phantom Lady was one of the comic books that Fredric Wertham cited in his *Seduction Of The Innocent* as promoting bondage.

The cover of the 3rd *Phantom Lady*, issue #17, is the very one with which Wertham took issue fifty years ago. As such, reprints of it are readily available. Phantom Lady is unquestionably the focus of attention here. Though the ropes are coming unbound, readers can still see the evidence of bondage that Wertham despised. And with a thigh wider than her waist and breasts nearly as large as her head, the Phantom Lady's physique here is a bit more exaggerated than the other superheroines of the 1940s, but is still firmly within the style of the time. Though she is tied up, she does not look frightened at all, and in fact glares directly at the reader. The heroine is depicted in the process of escaping her bonds, and has managed to free her black light ray. She is not quite in control, but it is clear that she soon will be. With her perfectly coifed hair, tiny blue shorts, skimpy halter top, and provocative pose, the Phantom Lady is definitely cheesecake material.

In 1946, the Blonde Phantom waltzed onto the scene. Created by Stan Lee for Marvel Comics, Louise Grant was a secretary by day, the masked crime fighter Blonde Phantom by night. Following the tradition of the Lois Lane, Clark Kent, Superman love

triangle, Louise was in love with her boss, who had fallen for the glamorous Blonde Phantom. Louise spent a lot of her time mooning over her boss, but when duty called would don the mask and evening gown of her alter ego, the Blonde Phantom (Robbins, 93-94). A gun strapped to her thigh was her only weapon, but still she succeeded in thwarting crime, foiling robberies, and saving the world from nuclear attack. In later years, she guest starred in other Marvel comics, including *Sub-Mariner* and *Marvel Mystery*. The Blonde Phantom also came back in 1989, this time as a matronly, middle-aged, married (to the boss at last!) sidekick for the She-Hulk.

The Blonde Phantom was spotlighted (quite literally) on *All Select Comics* #11 in 1946. Though depicted prominently on the cover, the superheroine appears distinctly uneasy, if not frightened. Perhaps it is her choice of evening wear. With her low cut, midriff baring, side slit, floor length evening gown and matching heels, she was definitely dressed to kill, but the wisdom of her choice in crime-fighting garb was seriously in doubt. Both coders noted that she was not doing anything on the cover of her debut feature. She passively stands in the light, looking uneasy while a menacing figure watches. Trapped in the spotlight as she is on this cover, it was easy to see that the Blonde Phantom had the somewhat idealized cheesecake appearance of the 1940s 'good girl' comics- a perfect physique, a pretty face, and a little skin showing.



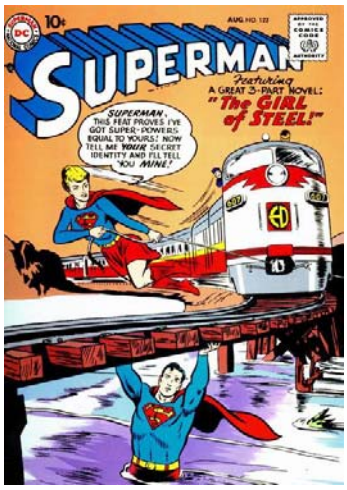
The 1950s

During the 1950s there was only one superheroine who eventually received her own title: Supergirl. While there were other superheroines introduced during the '50s, the parameters of this study excluded them from this discussion, because they did not have their own titles.

In 1958, DC Comics tested out a Supergirl character in Superman #123. After helping Superman to rescue an archaeologist, Jimmy Olsen is rewarded with an ancient totem that supposedly will grant wishes once a century under the light of a full moon. By the wildest coincidence, that very night was a full moon, and Jimmy wishes "that a Super-girl, with super-powers equal to Superman's, would appear and become his companion" (Superman, 3). Thus, Super-girl is born. At the end of the issue, the wished-for Super-girl dies, but apparently was popular enough that Supergirl was brought back with a new origin story in 1959. This Supergirl was said to be Superman's cousin, and was a young girl when she was sent to Earth. Wearing a brown wig and going by the name Linda Lee Danvers, Supergirl had powers similar to her cousin's, including fantastic strength and flight. Over the next few years, Supergirl acquired some super-pets, including a super-cat and a super-horse. She joined the Legion of Superheroes and battled evil with the team for a number of years, then finally received her own title in 1972, then again in 1982, and several times thereafter.

Appearing in DC Comics' *Superman* #123, "the girl of steel" is definitely holding her own in this cover scene. The Comics Code Authority approval stamp is posted conspicuously in the corner, pasting over even Superman's name. Super-girl is depicted with Superman, cooperating to get a train safely across the river. Flying and hauling a

train demonstrate some of her super powers. Flying aside, she is depicted in a reasonable position, and appears to be realistically proportioned. She is clothed fairly modestly. Her outfit somewhat mirrors Superman's, with a form-fitting bodysuit and shorter cape, but the mini skirt and high heeled boots offer a definite departure from the Man of Steel's attire. (Why Super-girl wears a mini skirt when she spends a great deal of time flying around above the heads of mortals mystified the coders.) Directing Superman to reveal his secret identity in exchange for the revelation of hers, Super-girl appears to be powerfully in charge of the situation.



The 1960s

The selected heroines of the 1960s included Batgirl, Zatanna, and Vampirella.

Zatanna the magician was conjured up by DC Comics in 1964 to make her first appearance in *Hawkman* #4. The daughter of the master magician Zatara (who appeared with Superman in 1938's *Action Comics*), Zatanna was able to work magic by reciting her spells backwards. She had made guest appearances in many other comic book titles over the years, usually looking for her parents. At one point she teamed with her father, at another she was voted by readers to be the next addition to the Justice League of America. Zatanna eventually received her own title in 1993.

In 1966, Zatanna appeared on the cover of DC's *Green Lantern* #42. The CCA stamp is clearly visible in the upper right hand corner, but Zatanna herself is curled up away from the action on the bottom of the page. The Green Lantern takes care of

business while she cowers behind him. She certainly does not appear to be in control of the situation, and is not demonstrating or using any of her powers. Her body is depicted fairly realistically, though her thigh does appear to be wider than her waist. Zatanna is wearing her standard crime fighting costume of fishnet stockings, a black body suit, a tuxedo shirt and jacket (with tails), high heels, and top hat. At least on this cover, Zatanna appears to be quite helpless.

1961 saw the introduction of Betty Kane, the niece of Batman's then girlfriend Kathy Kane, as Bat-girl. This Bat-girl proved unpopular, but five years later the editors of DC Comics tried again. This time Batgirl was Barbara Gordon, the librarian daughter of Commissioner Gordon. A brown belt in judo, Batgirl also had a skirt that turned into a cape and a purse that transformed into a utility belt like Batman's. She created the Batgirl costume for the Policeman's Masquerade Ball. On the way to the Party, she encountered the Killer Moth and Bruce Wayne having an unpleasant argument. She stopped to intervene, using her skill in judo to save the day, and Batgirl was born. She rarely acted on her own, but would usually accompany Batman and Robin on their crime fighting missions. In the 1990s, she was shot and paralyzed by the Joker. Forced to give up her stint as Batgirl, Barbara returned to her librarian roots and became an information guru. Assuming the name Oracle, she now works as a team with Black Canary.

Detective Comics #359 features Barbara Gordon's Batgirl debut. The CCA stamp appears on the cover along with Batman, Robin, and Batgirl herself. With her cape billowing out behind her, she appears to be running right off the cover. Batgirl is entirely clothed and masked, with only her hair and the lower half of her face uncovered. She sports a handbag on her belt and wears spike-heeled boots. With Batman and Robin to back her up, Batgirl looks ready to take care of business.

Vampirella made her first appearance in 1969. Her original story described how Vampirella came to Earth from her dying planet Drakulon, where the rivers flowed with blood. In the story, she was of a race similar to the legendary vampires, but was not truly one of them. In later years, however, her writers made that story a memory implant, and she has since been declared the 'Chosen One' put on Earth to fight evil, to rid the world of those who would prey on the weak and innocent. Vampirella has her own sense of honor, and has battled demons, cults, murderers, rapists, and more in her quest to conquer evil. The scientist who found her (and amputated her wings) when she first arrived created a serum that would substitute for the human blood she otherwise craved. Vampirella's powers (aside from the fangs) included super-human strength and the ability to shape-shift.

Vampirella #1 was unveiled in September of 1969 by Warren Publishing. Released in a larger magazine-sized format, Vampirella escaped the authority of the Comics Code, and so displays no CCA stamp or other warnings either. Her 'clothing' reveals more than it conceals, but makes it easy to see that her body is depicted realistically. What her clothing does reveal is more than half of her breasts, her entire torso, and most of her limbs. Her stiletto-heeled boots and the confident look upon her face appear to be her only weapons. With her legs spread in what appears to be a very uncomfortable position and a come-hither pout on her face, she does not convey any particular image of either strength or power.

The 1970s

Red Sonja, Ms. Marvel, and Black Orchid were the randomly selected titles for the 1970s.

Marvel Comics introduced Red Sonja to the comic book world through *Conan the Barbarian*. Though she first appeared as an incidental character, Stan Lee decided that "the heavenly Hyrkanian was so powerful, so compelling a character, that we just had to give her her own featured story, and then- by popular demand- her own magazine!" (Lee, 35) Maurice Horne writes that the fiery-haired, fierce-tempered Red Sonja was "a sword-wielding, man-baiting adventuress, clear out of the dark night of history, when only might made right and no mercy was given…not likely to knuckle under to any man" (Horn, 189). When she was a girl, her village was destroyed, her family murdered, and

she herself was raped. As a result of the rape, an unknown goddess granted Sonja her abilities with which to gain vengeance: fierceness, strength, and prowess with the sword.

Marvel Comics spawned *Red Sonja,* the *'She-Devil With A Sword*,' in 1976. Just below the half-inch CCA stamp in the corner, the cover announces Red Sonja as 'FIRE AND FURY IN THE AGE OF CONAN.' Though the background is filled with other creatures, Sonja herself is the main focus. She fills the cover, whirling her sword overhead. Her pose looks truly uncomfortable, with her legs straddling the corpse of an enormous serpent. Though her body is realistically proportionate, her hair is not. Most of her body is exposed, with a chain mail bikini covering only the bare necessities. With a look of severe intensity on her face, the indomitable Red Sonja is ready to hack her way through some new adventure.

The Black Orchid was a mysterious character who appeared in 1973. The star of three of DC's *Adventure Comics* issues, the art of *Black Orchid* was almost psychedelic in appearance. She had the power of flight, was a master of disguise, and was apparently bulletproof. Not much was known about her, which made her all the more intriguing to readers.

Adventure Comics #428 saw the origin of DC's Black Orchid. On the debut issue, the CCA stamp appears, though somewhat less prominently than usual. The Black

Orchid's is the foremost image on the page, her vivid costume setting her off from the muted tones of the rest of the cover. She is the focus of attention. She looks to be in command of the situation, preparing to pounce through the open window. Her spread wings indicate that she will be able to fly, but what powers she may have are not evident in this illustration. She is proportioned realistically, and is actually covered from head to toe. She wears a skintight bodysuit, and a cap covers her hair. The bats and full moon in the background add to the overall impression of mystery that the Black Orchid embodies.

Ms. Marvel has played many roles in the Marvel Universe. Known as Carol Danvers in her alter ego, Ms. Marvel appeared on the scene in 1977. Ms. Marvel "totally represented the new, liberated, upbeat spirit" that Marvel Comics wanted to represent (Lee, 84). She was supposed to embody the feminist spirit. Her writer Gerry Conway explained that readers "might see a parallel between her quest for identity, and the modern woman's quest for raised consciousness, for self-liberation, for identity…" but goes on to explain and apologize that the book was written by a man: "For whatever reason (right or wrong), at the moment there are no thoroughly trained and qualified women writers in the superhero comics field… There should be, no denying it, but there aren't" (quoted by Robbins, 126). She had super-strength, could fly, and had a 'seventh

sense' that could warn her of danger, but it did not help her title's sales, and her title folded after two years.

Marvel Comics released Ms. Marvel #1 in 1977. Billed on the cover as "a bold new super-heroine in the senses-stunning tradition of Spider-man," Ms. Marvel crashes through some rocky substance, her fist thrust upward in a pose reminiscent of Superman. She actually appears in five places on this cover, both as Ms. Marvel and as Carol Danvers. On the left side of the cover, her face appears next to the title, she has just been felled by the Scorpion in one picture, and is talking on the phone in the other. On the right, she clings to a wall of some sort. But the coders all noted that the bright yellow star on her chest draws attention immediately to that area. A skintight bodysuit covers her upper chest and arms entirely, but her legs and torso apparently need no such covering and are left bare. A decorative scarf, gloves and boots are part of her ensemble as well as she charges forth. As the cover declares, "this female fights back!"

The 1980s

The randomly selected superheroines of the 1980s were She-Hulk, Amethyst, and Dawn.

Though Marvel Comics copyrighted her name in 1979, *She-Hulk* did not appear until 1980. Jennifer Walters was a successful attorney until her cousin Bruce Banner was forced to perform an emergency blood transfusion with his blood. The influx of gamma-

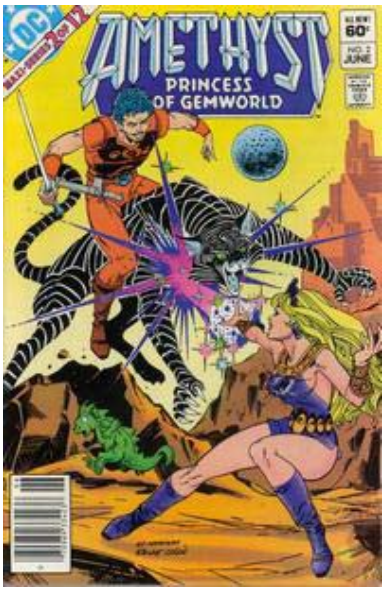
radiated blood turned Jennifer into the Hulk's female counterpart: the She-Hulk. A criminal defense lawyer by profession, her transfused blood turned her into a green giant. As the She-Hulk, Jennifer stood over six and a half feet tall and possessed enormous strength.

Filling most of the cover, the big green-skinned beauty is definitely the focus of attention on the cover or Marvel Comics' Savage She Hulk #1. If the bright green skin of She-Hulk does not catch the eye, Jennifer's magenta-colored pants certainly will. The Comics Code Authority stamp appears in the corner. (One of the coders pointed out that this cover had the distinction of being the only one with two pair of bosoms in the center of the page.) The She-Hulk's thighs and hair were apparently more affected by the gamma rays than the rest of her body, as her thigh is now wider than her waist and her short, red, bobbed hair is now a veritable mane of green tendrils. Her shirt also appears to have grown with her body, so at least its tattered remains offer her some modesty, but her other clothes have since disappeared and her limbs are bare. With a dark scowl on her face and people in the background running in fear, the She-Hulk is a most imposing figure.

Amy Winston was thirteen when she received the magical necklace that transformed her into the fully-grown Princess of Gemworld, Amethyst. She was introduced by DC Comics in 1983 as a child with a legacy. The parents she had known were not her real parents, and the little princess had been sent to Earth for protection, just

as Superman's parents had sent him more than forty years earlier. Amethyst had a large following, and reader responses to DC succeeded in extending the original twelve issue title to twenty-eight. Her story had elements of faerie tales and fantasy in them, which drew readers like flies. She had a handsome prince who loved her and a winged unicorn- she was the dream of many little girls. She was introduced into the Legion of Superheroes but received her own title shortly thereafter.

It was during the same year that *Amethyst, Princess of Gemworld* was published. The second issue of the series had Amethyst battling a large tiger-like creature and rider. She looks as though she is falling (as one of the coders noted that no person could stand like that). Although she has apparently lost her footing, she has still loosed a blast of sparkly energy upon her attackers. The small bodysuit/mini-dress outfit she's wearing leaves most of her legs and back bare, and if the cat pouncing on her does not hurt, the fall onto the jagged rock at the bottom right will certainly injure her unprotected backside. The heroine does not look frightened at all, but neither does she appear confidently in charge of the situation.



Created by Sirius Comics in 1989, Dawn is the eternal goddess of birth and re-birth. She protects the Earth while dealing with both angels and demons. She traded her body to the Lord of Death for knowledge, and is now his constant companion.

Cry For Dawn witnessed Dawn's first comic book appearance. As an independent publisher, Sirius does not include CCA stamps on their books, but Cry For Dawn does include a rating that reads "for mature readers," The paleness of her skin, and the skeletal figure who holds her, draws attention directly to Dawn. As the main focus of attention, her figure fills the center of the cover, held even as she is in what appears to be an awkward position. She appears to be chained to the skeleton's left arm. Her limbs are exposed, as is most of her body- despite the silk and lace lingerie she wears .It is difficult to determine whether her hand is on the large poleaxe the skeleton wields, but either way she appears to be very much at the mercy of her skeletal… friend.

The 1990s

Warrior Nun Areala, Lady Rawhide, and Chastity were randomly selected to represent the 1990s.

Antarctic Press introduced the world to the warrior nuns in 1994. Areala was a Valkyrie who turned away from Odin to serve God back in Viking days. Once a century, her spirit imbued a chosen one so that she could continue to fight injustice and evil in the world. Sister Shannon Masters was from an elite core of thirteen warrior nuns who defended the Earth from the powers of Hell. After losing an arm to a demon in a ferocious battle, she was given a mechanical replacement that somehow was imbued with the spirit of Areala. With the strength and prowess of the Valkyrie helping her, the new

Areala continued to protect the innocent, and only killed demons- she believed that everybody, no matter how bad they had been, could be saved.

Warrior Nun Areala was released by Antarctic Press in December of 1994. Another independently published title, the Warrior Nun has no ratings or warning labels of any kind. Areala herself fills the cover in her modified nun's habit. The habit, with its contrasting black and white fabrics, focuses attention on Areala's bosom, which is partially revealed by the open laces. The design and cut of her outfit expose most of her limbs and torso. A cut on her cheek, a skull at her belt, a large bloody sword in her hand, and the blood dripping from her mechanical left arm all indicate that this is one nun that can take care of herself, and anything else that comes up.

Lady Rawhide made her debut appearance in the Zorro comics published by Topps Comics, Inc. in 1995. Tantalizing the same Spanish dons that the Zorro annoys, she is known by most as Anita Santiago, a wealthy socialite. While possessing no real super-powers, she is extraordinarily skilled with a bullwhip, and was promoted by Topps as "a very strong role model" (Sullivan, 37). Lady Rawhide trades flirtatious quips and double entendres with the soldiers who chase her, and the lady always wins.

On the cover of her debut issue, Lady Rawhide is revealed by Topps Comics. Poised on a wall with her bullwhip in hand, she beckons readers to "read a comic that's not just for little boys," and there is no rating present. Her thigh is wider than her waist

and her upper thigh is at least as long as her torso and head, but it all appears fairly proportionate. Her over-the-knee laced boots and lace-up gloves cover her lower extremities, but her upper thighs, chest, shoulders, and backside have little protection. Her high-collared leather teddy/bodice reveals a great deal of her chest and stomach, which fits well with the 'come-hither' look on her face. Such confidence and cockiness as she displays reveal her to be quite commanding.

Chaos! Comics introduced readers to Chastity Marks in 1995. She was supposed to be a bit player in *Evil Ernie: Straight to Hell*, but her creators decided to give her a break. After more guest appearances in other Chaos! titles, she was given her own title in 1997. Chastity was a teenager when she fell into the punk rock scene in London while she was visiting. Though she planned to be an actress, fate had other things in mind for her and she fell victim to a vampire. She was trained as an assassin for a time, but when she decided she was not cut out for the job, she decided to use her powers to fight evil and protect innocents.

Chastity appears here in the second issue of her 2001 series. Chaos! Comics places no ratings on the title. The vampire looks angry and pained as she attempts to show off her bosom, her backside, and her leg all at the same time. Both her breasts and her thighs are larger than her waist, and (according to the coders)

the twist in her spine looks extremely painful. Her chest is revealed more than concealed, as are her limbs and the rest of her torso. Her armored, spiked battle thong and spiky stiletto-heeled boots, not to mention the large katana and bared fangs, make Chastity intimidating, and very unapproachable. She may look bad, but she is dangerous too.

The 2000s

The representatives selected randomly for the 2000s were Vandala, Jade, and Bad Kitty.

Vandala's story is nearly epic in nature. Her mother was loyal to Odin, and when she and her two children were caught in a violent snowstorm, she called to him for protection. Odin arrived, taking her children under his wing. He vowed to protect them and train them as Valkyrie. One was Lady Death, who became the ruler of the Netherworld. The other was Vandala, the pure of heart. Vandala was truly a Valkyrie, the last survivor of Asgard.

On the cover of her debut title for Chaos! Comics in 2001, Vandala is the focus of attention. In Chaos! style, there is no rating indicated. Vandal herself fills more than half the cover. Her body appears to be twisted uncomfortably so that her backside and breast are both visible. Like the other Chaos! girls, Vandala's thigh is wider than her waist. Most of her body is exposed, though her boots and gloves apparently cover the lower arms and legs. Vandala's armor consists of a battle thong, an armored bikini top, and metallic shoulder

pads. She holds a large sword in one hand, but looks neither intimidating nor powerful. Her wings and pupil-less eyes give her an otherworldly look, but she does not seem to be at all fearsome.

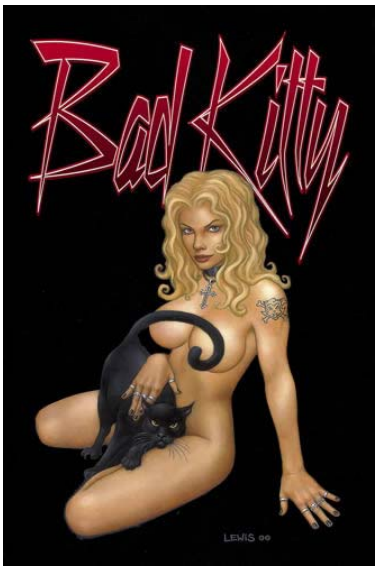
Jade was over 4,000 years old. She had been the boss of a powerful Shanghai crime family for longer than most can remember. Brought to power in 2001 by Chaos! Comics, the anti-hero Jade was disgusted with the way that China had lost its dignity and honor, and strove to unite the country again- under her rule. By using her powers as a sorceress and a vampire to conquer all of the other crime families in China, she hoped to take control of China herself. Jade was incredibly wealthy and was accompanied by her friend Silence, a ninja and bodyguard who was skilled in the martial arts. Jade was a crime-fighter, but only so that she could control all.

Jade #1 appeared in May of 2001. Chaos! Presents offered Jade to readers with no ratings as part of a mini-series of four. Jade fills at least half of the cover, focusing attention on the only bright color in the illustration: on the golden strap that holds her breasts in place- breasts that are each larger than her waist. Her hair seems to have a mind of its own, blowing in a breeze that does not affect the strategically placed green cloth that forms her clothing. The straps that cover her chest reveal more than half of her breasts, and her legs and torso are revealed more than concealed. She wields a huge sword and glares ahead menacingly with her pupil-less eyes, but the robotic figures and the dragons in the background appear content to leave her alone.

Jade's white-eyed stare, unconcerned poise, and the large sword held at the ready let readers know that she is not to be messed with.

Chaos! introduced Catherine Bell in 2001 as a policewoman who always walked the straight and narrow path. Right was right. Wrong was not. Even when faced with the corruption in her own division (in the form of Voodoo magic), Catherine still tried to keep order in New Orleans. But when the man she loved was turned into a zombie and was ordered to kill her, she got mad. She 'fixed' the problem, leaving the guilty parties lying in the river. Wanted by the FBI, she took on a new identity as 'Bad Kitty.' She and her 'familiar,' a very special black cat named Lucky, prowled the streets after that, dodging the authorities and righting wrongs when they found them.

On the cover of *Bad Kitty,* Chaos! Comics' 2001 release, Bad Kitty has the



dubious distinction of being the only one of the heroines in this study to show up on her cover completely in the nude. Like the other Chaos! titles, there are no ratings present. Kitty does fill more than half of the cover. Her position does not look terribly comfortable (as one coder asked, 'where is her lower leg?'), especially if that cat has claws. Her physical attributes are all there for readers to see, with only Lucky the cat covering her assets with a strategically placed tail. The cat's tail is narrow enough that it is easy to see what is not depicted on Bad Kitty here as well. The look on her face is direct, but not threatening. Lucky does have a feline scowl on his face, but does not seem inclined to move. The cat

and crossbones tattoo on Bad Kitty's arm might be a tiny bit intimidating, but as she reveals everything she has, she appears to be quite vulnerable.

Summary Of Superheroines

Date	Name	Alter-Ego	1st Appearance	Occupation	Power/Ability/Weapon	Title Date
1941	Miss Fury	Marla Drake	Comic Strips	Socialite	Claws, Agility	1944
1941	Phantom Lady	Sandra Knight	Police Comics #1	Debutante	Black Light Ray	1946
1946	Blonde Phantom	Louise Grant	All Select Comics #11	Secretary	Gun	1946
1958	Supergirl	Kara Zor-El/Linda Lee Danvers	Superman #123	Teenager	Strength, Flight, etc.	1972
1964	Zatanna	Zatanna Zatara	Hawkman #4	Stage Magician	Spells	1993
1967	Batgirl	Barbara Gordon	Detective Comics #359	Librarian	Judo, Gadgets	1998
1969	Vampirella	Vampirella	Eerie #23? or Vampirella #1	Vampire Hunter	Strength, Shape shifting	1969
1973	Red Sonja	Sonja	Conan the Barbarian #23	Warrior	Strength, Warrior Skill	1976
1973	Black Orchid	unknown	Adventure Comics #428	Unknown	Flight, Deception, Strength	1988
1977	Miss Marvel	Linda Danvers	Marvel Super-Heroes #13	NASA security	Flight, Strength	1977
1980	She-Hulk	Jennifer Walters	Savage She-Hulk #1	Attorney	Size, Strength	1980
1983	Amethyst	Amy Winston	Legion of Super-Heroes #296	Teenager	Magic Amulet	1983
1989	Dawn	Dawn	Cry For Dawn #1	Goddess of Life	Birth & Rebirth	1989
1994	Areala	Sister Shannon Masters	Warrior Nun Areala #1	Nun	Arm Imbued With Spirit	1994
1995	Lady Rawhide	Anita Santiago	Zorro #3	Socialite	Bullwhip	1995
1995	Chastity	Chastity Marks	Evil Ernie: Straight to Hell	Actress/Assassin	Vampire	1997
2001	Vandala	Vandala	Vandala #1	Valkyrie	Strength, Purity, Warrior	2001
2001	Jade	Jade	Jade #1	Crime Boss	Sorceress/Vampire	2001
2001	Bad Kitty	Catherine Bell	Bad Kitty #1	Policewoman	Cat Familiar/Cop Skills	2001

Cover Art Index - 1940s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classifications	Miss Fury	Phantom Lady	Blonde Phantom
Cover Layout			
CCA stamp present			
Other rating present			
Subject fills 1/2 cover		xxx	Xxx
Other superheroes			
Actively engaged in conflict or action	xxx		
Demonstrating powers			
Pose/Posture			
Appear confident/ in charge	xxx	x	
Impossible/painful pose		xx	
Being struck			
Breasts within 1in. Center		xxx	
Bondage depicted		xxx	
Gratuitous backside/breast shot			
Physical Characteristics			
Breasts larger than waist/head			
Nipples visible or missing		xx	
Thigh larger than waist		xxx	
Thigh longer than torso + head			
Big hair		xx	
Clothing/Costume Coverage			
Fully covered	xxx		
Less than 1/2 breast covered		xxx	
Limbs exposed		xxx	xxx
Torso exposed		xxx	xxx
Shaving required			
Clothing & Accessories			
Battle thong/armored bikini			
Skintight bodysuit	xxx		
Lingerie/swimsuit			
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)		xxx	xxx
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped			
High/spiked/stiletto heels			
Subject wields weapons		x	

Cover Art Index - 1950s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classifications	Supergirl
Cover Layout	
CCA stamp present	xxx
Other rating present	
Subject fills ½ cover	
Other superheroes	xxx
Actively engaged in conflict or action	xxx
Demonstrating powers	xxx
Pose/Posture	
Appear confident/ in charge	xx
Impossible/painful pose	
Being struck	
Breasts within 1in. Center	x
Bondage depicted	
Gratuitous backside/breast shot	
Physical Characteristics	
Breasts larger than waist/head	
Nipples visible or missing	
Thigh larger than waist	
Thigh longer than torso + head	
Big hair	
Clothing/Costume Coverage	
Fully covered	
Less than 1/2 breast covered	
Limbs exposed	xxx
Torso exposed	
Shaving required	
Clothing & Accessories	
Battle thong/armored bikini	
Skintight bodysuit	xx
Lingerie/swimsuit	
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)	xxx
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped	
High/spiked/stiletto heels	xxx
Subject wields weapons	

Cover Art Index - 1960s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classifications	Zatanna	Batgirl	Vampirella
Cover Layout			
CCA stamp present	xxx	xxx	
Other rating present			
Subject fills ½ cover		xxx	xxx
Other superheroes	xxx	xxx	
Actively engaged in conflict or action		xxx	
Demonstrating powers			
Pose/Posture			
Appear confident/ in charge		xxx	xxx
Impossible/painful pose			xxx
Being struck			
Breasts within 1in. Center		xxx	xxx
Bondage depicted			
Gratuitous backside/breast shot			
Physical Characteristics			
Breasts larger than waist/head			
Nipples visible or missing			x
Thigh larger than waist			
Thigh longer than torso + head			
Big hair			
Clothing/Costume Coverage			
Fully covered		xxx	
Less than 1/2 breast covered			xxx
Limbs exposed	xx		xxx
Torso exposed			xxx
Shaving required			xxx
Clothing & Accessories			
Battle thong/armored bikini			
Skintight bodysuit	x	xxx	
Lingerie/swimsuit			xxx
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)	xxx	x	
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped			
High/spiked/stiletto heels	x	xx	xxx
Subject wields weapons			

Cover Art Index - 1970s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classification	Red Sonja	Ms. Marvel	Black Orchid
Cover Layout			
CCA stamp present	xxx	xxx	xxx
Other rating present			
Subject fills ½ cover	xxx	xxx	x
Other superheroes			
Actively engaged in conflict or action	xxx	xx	xx
Demonstrating powers		xxx	x
Pose/Posture			
Appear confident/ in charge	xx	xxx	xx
Impossible/painful pose	xxx		
Being struck		x	
Breasts within 1in. Center	xxx	xxx	xxx
Bondage depicted			
Gratuitous backside/breast shot			
Physical Characteristics			
Breasts larger than waist/head	x		
Nipples visible or missing			
Thigh larger than waist			x
Thigh longer than torso + head			
Big hair	xxx		
Clothing/Costume Coverage			
Fully covered			xxx
Less than 1/2 breast covered	xx		
Limbs exposed	xxx	xxx	
Torso exposed	xxx	xxx	
Shaving required		xx	
Clothing & Accessories			
Battle thong/armored bikini	xxx		
Skintight bodysuit		xxx	xxx
Lingerie/swimsuit		x	
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)			
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped		x	
High/spiked/stiletto heels			
Subject wields weapons	xxx		

Cover Art Index - 1980s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classifications	She-Hulk	Amethyst	Dawn
Cover Layout			
CCA stamp present	xxx	xxx	
Other rating present			xxx
Subject fills 1/2 cover	xxx		xxx
Other superheroes			
Actively engaged in conflict or action		xxx	
Demonstrating powers	x	xxx	
Pose/Posture			
Appear confident/ in charge	x	xx	
Impossible/painful pose		xxx	xx
Being struck			
Breasts within 1in. Center	xxx		xxx
Bondage depicted			xx
Gratuitous backside/breast shot			
Physical Characteristics			
Breasts larger than waist/head			
Nipples visible or missing		xx	
Thigh larger than waist	xxx	xxx	
Thigh longer than torso + head	x		
Big hair	xxx	xx	x
Clothing/Costume Coverage			
Fully covered			
Less than 1/2 breast covered			xx
Limbs exposed	xxx	xxx	xxx
Torso exposed	x	xxx	xxx
Shaving required			xxx
Clothing & Accessories			
Battle thong/armored bikini			
Skintight bodysuit		xx	
Lingerie/swimsuit		x	xxx
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)	xxx		
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped	xxx		
High/spiked/stiletto heels			
Subject wields weapons			x

Cover Art Index - 1990s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classifications	Areala	Lady Rawhide	Chastity
Cover Layout			
CCA stamp present			
Other rating present			
Subject fills 1/2 cover	xxx	xxx	xx
Other superheroes			
Actively engaged in conflict or action			x
Demonstrating powers			x
Pose/Posture			
Appear confident/ in charge	xx	xxx	
Impossible/painful pose			xxx
Being struck			
Breasts within 1in. Center	xxx	xx	xxx
Bondage depicted			x
Gratuitous backside/breast shot			xxx
Physical Characteristics			
Breasts larger than waist/head			xx
Nipples visible or missing	xxx		
Thigh larger than waist	xx	xxx	xxx
Thigh longer than torso + head			
Big hair			
Clothing/Costume Coverage			
Fully covered			
Less than 1/2 breast covered	xxx	x	xxx
Limbs exposed	xxx	xxx	xxx
Torso exposed	xxx	xx	xxx
Shaving required	xxx	xxx	x
Clothing & Accessories			
Battle thong/armored bikini			xxx
Skintight bodysuit		x	
Lingerie/swimsuit	x	xx	
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)	xxx		
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped		x	xxx
High/spiked/stiletto heels			xxx
Subject wields weapons	xxx	xxx	xxx

Cover Art Index - 2000s

The number of 'x' marks indicates the number of coders that recorded a given characteristic

Classifications	Vandala	Jade	Bad Kitty
Cover Layout			
CCA stamp present			
Other rating present			
Subject fills 1/2 cover	xxx	xxx	xxx
Other superheroes			
Actively engaged in conflict or action			
Demonstrating powers			
Pose/Posture			
Appear confident/ in charge	x	xx	
Impossible/painful pose			xx
Being struck			
Breasts within 1in. Center	xxx	xxx	xxx
Bondage depicted			
Gratuitous backside/breast shot	xxx		xxx
Physical Characteristics			
Breasts larger than waist/head		xxx	
Nipples visible or missing			xxx
Thigh larger than waist	x	x	
Thigh longer than torso + head		xx	
Big hair	x	xxx	
Clothing/Costume Coverage			
Fully covered			
Less than 1/2 breast covered	x	xxx	xxx
Limbs exposed	xxx	xxx	xxx
Torso exposed	xxx	xxx	xxx
Shaving required	xx		xxx
Clothing & Accessories			
Battle thong/armored bikini	xxx	x	
Skintight bodysuit			
Lingerie/swimsuit			
Other clothing (shorts, skirt, etc)		xx	
Clothing torn, tattered, unzipped			
High/spiked/stiletto heels			
Subject wields weapons	xxx	xxx	

Discussion

1940s

As Bill Black noted, “to the American G.I. in World War II, the pinup became a very important reminder of the life he left back home” (Black, 32). “Good Girl” art was created to fill this need, and it translated well to comic books. After facing the grim realities of war, “a leggy blonde in a tight fitting outfit filled the bill and would attract sales” (Black, 32). Also known as ‘headlight comics’ or ‘cheesecake,’ these good girl titles of the 1940s were filled with beautiful women in difficult situations. The genre gave birth to a surprising number of superheroines, nearly half of whom were eventually featured in their own titles. Most of the superheroines of the 1940s fit somewhere between the Phantom Lady and the Blonde Phantom, wearing more than the first but less than the second. And of course, all were beautiful.

1950s

The 1950s were not a good time for superheroes. Television’s growing popularity may well have detracted potential readers from comic books, Wertham’s *Seduction Of The Innocent* had parents all over the country on red alert, and the introduction of the Comics Code Authority all combined to seriously restrict the publishing field. The big three of DC (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) made it through relatively unscathed, as did a few other familiar names, but the ‘50s were a rough time for

superheroines. The superwomen introduced in the late ‘40s all disappeared by 1955. Few superheroes were introduced, but even fewer super-powered heroines appeared. In 1956 DC Comics announced Batwoman, Batman’s then girlfriend Kathy Kane, an heiress and trapeze artist who ‘helped’ Batman and Robin with her specialized equipment like powder puff sneezing powders and smoke bomb lipsticks. Marvel introduced twelve-year-old Janie Jackson, Tomboy, in 1954, an athletic little superheroine who packed a solid punch (Robbins, 103). But the only superheroine to eventually get her own title was 1959’s Supergirl.

1960s

The ‘60s brought more superheroines into prominence, mainly by putting them on teams. Susan Storm (Invisible Girl) was introduced with the Fantastic Four. Jean Grey (Marvel Girl) appeared with the X-Men. Janet Van Dyne (The Wasp) joined The Avengers. Wonder Woman even joined the Justice League. Although the heroines joined teams, they were still often depicted as frivolous characters: the Invisible Girl was given to fits of hysterics and fainting spells when using her power. Marvel Girl would often faint when she tried to use her gifts. The Wasp spent a lot of time powdering her nose (Robbins, 114-155). Wonder Woman was even made the secretary of the Justice League. It took nearly forty years for Zatanna and Batgirl to break away from their male counterparts and finally hold their own titles. Other superheroines (Shrinking Violet, Light Lass, and Wonder Girl, for example) were not so lucky, and faded into obscurity when their team titles failed.

1970s

In the '70s, superheroines became more powerful, more capable of going out on their own. Many became partners and team leaders instead of only minor members. According to Hurt, comics of this decade "tended to be uneasy about portraying strong women, ridiculing or misrepresenting the feminist movement" (Hurt, 3). Marvel Comics tried to reach out to the female market and created Valkyrie, a warrior for women's liberation who proved in the end to be a witch. In 1972 Marvel offered up *The Cat*: a superheroine comic written by women. Unfortunately, as Glicksohn noted, many comic book writers denigrated and vilified the Women's Liberation movement. Then in 1977, Marvel created Carol Danvers, Ms. Marvel. The Marvel creators emphasized "how important it was… that Ms. Marvel be treated and depicted in exactly the same manner as any of her male counterparts" (Lee, 84). Yet before her title completed its run, Ms. Marvel had her powers stolen and was raped, impregnated, and mind-controlled. (I somehow doubt that many male superheroes have been raped on the pages of comic books.) The 'exactly the same manner' statement did not even hold for the short while that Ms. Marvel's title was still selling.

1990s & 2000s

The 1990s and 2000s have seen both the best and worst in comics. The covers analyzed and indexed earlier reflect the tremendous boom in the so-called 'bad girl' movement, which has become quite popular. It is not only the bad girls who are depicted in this light, as many heroines warrant the same treatment. In recent years, readers have watched as many illustrators of superheroine titles have thrown *Gray's Anatomy* right out

the window. Many heroines appear to have broken backs or spines that are curved in impossible ‘S’ shapes. A Glory/Avengylene crossover comic from Image Comics in 1996

illustrates the new look. Notice how the swaybacked women’s spines appear to be bent to the breaking point. Their ridiculously tiny waists are nearly hidden behind their forearms. The heroines’ breasts are the same size as their heads, and could never be supported by those snapped spines. No matter the size of their thighs, these superheroines would have severe problems standing upright, let alone wielding huge swords and shields in battle. The general silliness of the women themselves is enough- there will be little comment on their relative lack of protective coverings. Apparently in the 1990s and 2000s, the battle thong and armored bustier (along with the random assorted metallic bracers, armbands, collars, garters, and hair bands) are standard equipment for the busy superheroine who strives to rid the world of evil.

The Comics Code included specific regulations pertaining to the portrayal of women in comic books. According to Part C of the Comics Code Authority, “nudity in any form is prohibited. Suggestive and salacious illustration is unacceptable. Females

shall be drawn realistically without undue emphasis on any physical quality… Rape shall never be shown or suggested. Seduction may not be shown…" (Goldwater, 45-46). As the authority of the Comics Code waned in the decades following its institution, the depiction of women presented in the comics began to follow this trend as well as costumes got skimpier and plot lines got more fraught with sexual situations.

Comics are supposed to be exaggerated. Everything is bigger, louder, more colorful, more exciting, and more acceptable when colored and inked. Yes, men are exaggerated to extremes, and yes their physiques are completely unrealistic. Fantasy heroes are not limited by reality, and the exaggerations are supposed to suggest super-powers. Hence the slim-hipped, square-jawed, broad-shouldered exaggerations of male superheroes are intended to portray a sense of masculinity through strength and physical power. Yet women are exaggerated to accent their femininity. Most specifically, the legs, backsides, and bosoms of superheroines have increased dramatically- some to the point of silliness as illustrated above. Male characters wear costumes that cover them from head to toe, but it is rare for female characters to be covered up- most have bare legs, a plunging neckline, or some combination of the two. One of the most interesting things the coders noted was that nine times out of ten, on the covers of comic books the superheroines' bountiful bosoms were located within an inch of the center of the page. This trait held true throughout each decade, and was repeated in most of the other covers examined as well. Do the illustrators of comic books believe, as Freudian theory states, that breasts are a power feature?

Though they may not necessarily be a power feature, breasts are usually the focus of attention. The exaggeration of superheroines' breast sizes is the subject of much

discussion and anger in the female comic reading community. *Sequential Tart*, an online web zine about the comics industry features a monthly column called *Bizarre Breasts*, which focuses on the latest comic book depictions of the female anatomy. Upon seeing these superheroines with ridiculously large breasts, wasp-sized waists too thin to hold internal organs, spines that have apparently been snapped, thighs twice as long as their bodies, and long flowing manes that never manage to get caught by a villain, one of the coders thought that superwomen must have extra powers that allow them to stand upright. Given the type of physical exaggerations that superheroines are subject to, it is difficult to believe that most female superheroines are truly intended for female audiences, or that they ever were.

When looking at superheroines in the comic books, it is difficult to see the justification behind their costumes. If one is going to be flitting about the sky while battling villains, why wear a miniskirt (*Supergirl*, *Mary Marvel*)? If one's profession requires extensive range of motion, why wear a corset (*Lady Rawhide*)? If running after bad guys is in the job description, what is the point of wearing stiletto heels (*Zatanna*)? How did the battle thong (*Vandala*, *Chastity*) get approved as appropriate demon-fighting attire? Many superheroines, especially those of recent years, are attired in costumes that seem more appropriate for dancing on tables than for saving the world. It seems odd that women who are supposed to be role models, the responsible superheroines of the comics who fight evil and battle for good, are thrust into "outrageous ensembles of thigh-boots, spiked heels, fishnet stockings, thongs, and strapless-frontless-backless costumes that would serve, should the superhero business ever fail, as suitable work clothes for turning tricks…" (Superheroine's, 3). The typical dress code for warrior women apparently

allows only for the skintight bodysuit, the battle thong, miniskirts and leotards, or some sort of lingerie or swimwear. In studying female readers of comic books, Trina Robbins found that women drawn realistically, in terms of body shape, clothing, and footwear tend to be more successful with female readers (Robbins, 36). If this is true, then surely comic book publishers have made note? Or perhaps they simply do not care?

The president of DC Comics, Jenette Kahn, acknowledges that comic books are based on "male fantasies even if the character is supposedly female. This dependence on male fantasies is also self-perpetuating. Since most comics are based on male fantasies, few women read them; since few women read them few women are interested in the comic book industry, comics are based on male fantasies" (Delaware, 35). The recent advent of the superhuman lingerie and swimsuit issues of comic books tends to support this idea. Designed after the popular *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issues, various comic book superheroines model swimwear in the same provocative poses as their real counterparts. When publishers present such offerings, it is difficult to take seriously the claim that female characters appeal to a female audience. As Sullivan notes, "*Lady Death* sells 160,000 copies each month, about as much as classic favorites like Superman. Crusade Comics' sensual *Shi* often outsells Batman… the big guys-- Marvel and Time Warner's DC Comics-- are squeezing more of their traditional female characters into peek-a-boo costumes" (Sullivan, 37). Publishers know that sex sells, and

many other companies have now jumped at the opportunity the swimsuit editions offer. Marvel, Image, Chaos, Ballistic, Comico and others have all produced their own swimsuit or lingerie issues.

Young superheroines seem to be the only ones who escape the typical 'sexual fantasy' requirement for comic book heroines, and were seemingly the only ones truly and specifically intended for a young female audience. In the 1940s, Fawcett Publications introduced Mary Marvel as Billy Batson's sister. When she learned that the magic word "SHAZAM" transformed Billy into the superhero Captain Marvel, she tried it herself. Sure enough, she too was transformed. Whereas Billy becomes the adult Captain Marvel, Mary retained her own age. She could fly and was super-strong, and shared all of Captain Marvel's abilities. She was created as a twelve year old girl, with curly brown hair and a knee-length skirt. Later artists shortened her skirt a bit and aged her a few years, but for the most part, she remained a young girl. Mary had her own titled series, a fan club, and even her own fashion line. She was believable as a character, an ordinary little girl who just happened to have a little something extra. More importantly, she looked like a little girl, and any girl reading about her could imagine herself in Mary's place.

About ten years later, another young superheroine was introduced, this time by Marvel Comics. Tomboy was introduced in 1954, and lasted only a year. Janie Jackson was a perfect little lady to most, another twelve-year-old girl who fought for right. Though she wore frilly dresses and bows in her hair as Janie, Tomboy sported a black mask and a packed a powerful punch. She had the criminal element shivering in fear. And like Mary Marvel, Tomboy looked like a little girl, she dressed like a little girl, and she surely appealed to little girls (Robbins, 104-105).

When she was introduced (the second incarnation) in 1959, Supergirl was a teenager. She had the problems of a teenager, and the interests of a teenager. As many girls dreamed, Supergirl had a telepathic super-horse who could talk to her. She even had a super-cat. She fell in and out of love. She *was* a teenager. As the years passed, she began to reflect the more typical images of superheroines- her costumes got tighter, her skirts got shorter, she grew older, her hair (and chest) got bigger. Somewhere along the way she lost her horse. In the 1994 miniseries *Reign of Tomorrow*, she even appears topless. Apparently Supergirl grew up.

The same era that saw Supergirl topless is the one that brought about some of the more disturbing trends in comic books. The first could be considered startling, especially for women: the 'bad girl' genre described earlier is still popular. Hugely over-exaggerated sexual characteristics combine with violence to create chilling images. Another trend is the recycling of characters. An especially popular practice with the two big companies, Marvel and DC, is to kill off or write out familiar characters every few years so that they may be reintroduced as new ones. For example, over the years, there have been four Batgirls: Bat-girl (Betty Kane), Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), Batgirl (the daughter of Batman and Catwoman, who later became the Huntress), and now the new Batgirl (Cassandra Cain, a relatively unknown girl trained as an assassin). The big companies capitalize on a character's previous popularity by using the same names over and over again, or by introducing new story lines featuring that character under different titles. The recycling of names makes collecting difficult, as there may well be five #1 issues titled Batgirl, all from different eras. It is fascinating to see the differences in

reintroduced or updated characters. DC Comics' Wonder Woman, Catwoman, and the Black Canary have been around nearly as long as comic book superheroes have.

In her first appearance, Wonder Woman had the slim, athletic build of an Amazon. A knee length skirt and red breastplate emblazoned with a golden eagle were made by her mother in an adapted version of the traditional Amazon garb. The Wonder

Woman of February 1997 is barely recognizable as the same woman. Gone is the skirt, to be replaced with brief blue bikini bottoms. Her magical bracelets have evolved into full length bracers which actually would protect her arms. The breastplate is still present, but the back has vanished and protects less of her front. Her thigh, which is wider than both her waist and her head, is in true profile, yet her body is twisted impossibly so that both breasts can also be seen: even Wonder Woman was not exempt from the 'bad girl' influence.

Though Catwoman was a bad girl, she was not exempt from the 'bad girl' influence either. She was a jewel thief by trade, but worked for the fun of it. She worked with Batman at times, against him at others. At one point she even married him, but shortly thereafter they were both killed off in an alternate universe. (It is a very strange history.) During the course of her comic book career, she had undergone numerous costume changes. Introduced in the first issue of DC's Detective Comics, she was a

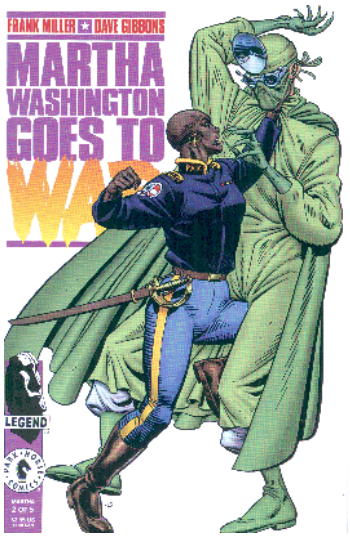
masked beauty known only as the cat. A few issues later she tried out a costume complete with a furry cat mask. A few more costumes followed, until she eventually settled on the look that is now known as 'classic Catwoman,' a stylish purple dress, long flowing cape, head-covering mask complete with ears, and high-heeled boots. In her 21st century appearance, the form-fitting dress has been replaced by a bodysuit so tight that even her navel is visible. Her boots are thigh high, and she now wears shoulder length gloves equipped with long claws. Her breasts are now bigger than her waist. Where her Golden Age self was a classy criminal, her recent appearances mark her as one of the true 'bad girls' of the comic book world.

Black Canary is another interesting study. Where the same characters embodied Wonder Woman and Catwoman for nearly sixty years (Diana Prince and Selina Kyle, respectively), the original Black Canary was killed off in the '60s, but her daughter was introduced as the new Black Canary in the '90s. In her February 1947 debut in *Flash Comics* #86, Dinah Drake was the Black Canary of the Golden Age, and as described earlier, wore fishnet stockings, a black teddy, a blue bolero jacket, high-heeled boots, and a blonde wig. She was a florist by profession, but was also a motorcycle riding stuntwoman. The Black Canary's daughter, confusingly also named Dinah, followed in her mother's footsteps in more ways than one. She ran a shop called Sherwood Florists,

and took up her mother's place as the Black Canary after her parents were killed.

Although when she was first reintroduced she wore the same impractical costume, today she has a new look. Gone is the blonde wig, replaced by an updated, more stylish cut. The fishnets are history, and the Black Canary has donned the skintight bodysuit familiar to so many other superheroines of the 1990s. Her boots are perhaps the greatest improvement- the high heels are gone at last. She looks tough rather than cute, which appears to be what many of the publishers are trying to do when recycling characters. Unfortunately, when companies simply reuse the old characters, new ones are not being created.

Luckily, there are many independent companies and new creators working on the future of superhero women in comic books. One of the promising new superheroines is Action Girl. Introduced in 1994 by Sarah Dyer, *Action Girl* comics feature a paper dolls activity page and a spunky young heroine. She fights crime in her heavily treaded, flat soled, 'evilstomping boots' and comfortable clothes.



Frank Miller and Dave Gibbons created Martha Washington, another tough but sensible heroine, whose adventures focus on the relative futility of war (Robbins, 176). She has played a number of roles in her life: prisoner, runaway, lunatic, soldier. In Miller's book, Martha Washington fights her way across America in search of the evil that undermines the country's freedom.

Robbins herself created another superheroine that girls could relate to: *GoGirl*. GoGirl is the daughter of GoGoGirl (a superheroine of the '70) and she has the ability to fly, but is basically still a teenager at heart. Each issue features colored mini-posters, paper dolls, and artwork and letters from readers. With superheroines like these finally beginning to gain in popularity, perhaps the big publishing houses will begin to focus their attentions on strong characters and begin to write comics that do not pander to their audiences.

Conclusions

Has there been development in the way in which superheroines are presented in comic books since the 1940s? There has been some development, but not all of it is positive. New publishers in the comic book field are perhaps the best hope for the future of superheroines.

It seems that the role of women in comic books has not significantly improved. As Jol Silversmith noted, "female characters are frequently mere beautiful objects rather than full-fledged characters… Even intelligent or powerful women do not seem to have the sense to fully clothe themselves; their value is ornamental" (Silversmith, 1). He has a point. Superheroines may not be specifically relegated to subservient roles any more, but the impracticality of their physiques diminishes the success of the improvement in status.

How do comic books portray superheroines? More often than not the answer appears to be 'not very well.' Superheroines of today do have starring roles in titles of their own, they do have stronger powers and abilities, and they do have more varied and realistic lives than their sisters of yesteryear. The women who succeed in comic books are usually strong characters to start with, but the way they are portrayed often devalues or diminishes their strength. But there have been positive moves in the depiction of superheroines.

The '40s introduced superheroines predominantly as 'cheesecake' pinup girls. The '50s and '60s launched more powerful, but still ultra-feminine characters who spent

a lot of time shopping, fainting, or in hysterics. The ‘70s brought liberated superheroines into the foreground, and proved that they could work solo. Superheroines of the ‘80s gained stronger powers, more prominent places on teams, and more fully developed characters. In the ‘90s, superheroines finally managed to come into their own, largely by becoming anti-heroines or showing off their curvaceous frames. It is wonderful that both male and female audiences now find strong and powerful women worthy of superhero status, but the ‘bad girls’ have done much to damage the dwindling female readership of comic books. The last part of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s have brought more of the same- either blood-soaked anti-heroines in battle thongs and stiletto heels, or superheroine ‘role models’ who barely fit into their costumes. Luckily though, there is hope. The growing number of new mainstream and independent publishers may offer salvation to an otherwise dwindling genre. With strong and sensible superheroines like *Action Girl*, *Martha Washington*, and *GoGirl*, the future is looking brighter for superheroines, and for those who look up to them.

Future Study

This study brought up more associated questions and possibilities for future study than it did answers. There are many aspects of the portrayal of superheroines in comic books that were not addressed in this paper, but they would provide for fascinating research in the future.

One theme that came up constantly throughout the decades was the relationship between women and cats, as cat suits or cat themes figured into many of the superheroines' images. This theme produced Miss Fury, the Black Cat, the Kitten, Cheetah, and Catwoman, Supergirl's super-cat Streaky, The Cat, The Jaguar, Hellcat and others. Does the cat imagery have some mythical connotation to it? Is it a reflection of the Medieval association of women and cats with witches?

It would also be interesting to delve into the reasoning behind the diminutive –girl phenomenon in the comics. Why was it Doll Girl, Bullet Girl, Hawkgirl, Moon Girl, Sun Girl, even Supergirl? They weren't all sidekicks. Was it simply the time period, or was there some subtler reason?

An interesting way to determine the intended audience for a given comic book might be to scrutinize the advertisements included in the book. It is difficult to believe that the rifles for sale on the back of Supergirl's debut were meant for girls.

Though not many of these portrayals of superwomen have been positive, there are more issues that concern the relative absence of superhero women from other cultures.

There are a few popular superheroines of various races (Chaos! Jade is Chinese, Marvel's Storm is African, even Tarpe Mills' Miss Fury was Brazilian) but few have gained a great deal of presence in the comic book world as of yet.

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