Valkyries Handbook: Representations of Women in Comics

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The infinite variety of narratives delivered by all range of media, including comics, offer us a multitude of stories and characters that we can connect and empathize with, envy or reject, emulate or abhor. These narratives are deeply recognizable to us, growing from, as well as shaping our perception, our experience and our culture. They are drawn from the world around us, and they can both reflect and create a new reality. In this way, comics too are microcosms of our world, seen through a distorted lens, like the stretched and warped images in a funhouse mirror. They can seem surreal, or literally alien, but they are fundamentally familiar, emerging from our own experience and beliefs, for better or worse. Because of the format, there is the potential for limitless creativity in comics, with no monetary bindings for special effects or far reaching narratives. Many authors and artists have excellent portrayals of women, or people of color, like Alison Bechdel or Marjane Satrapi, whose autobiographical comics changed the industry. Yet, with all the apparent diversity of characters that we encounter in comics, the representation of women, especially in mainstream comics, are often remarkably one-dimensional, following standard archetypes and stereotypes of the female form, personality and power.

This project will delve into the surprisingly uniform treatment of the female character in comic storytelling, online, in print and in film and will further examine how this has evolved over time, and what these changes represent for the stories, the
characters, the creators, and the readers.

Comics have been changing rapidly in the last 10 years, in their identity, design, authorship, and distribution platforms. The portrayal of women in comics has evolved as well and there are more women involved in every step of the industry than ever before. Yet the gender parity among both creators and characters remains excruciatingly small.

This project will examine the gender divide within the industry. It will also analyze the manner in which women are physically portrayed, the manner in which their character arcs unfold, frequently in reference to a man, and the classically patriarchal structure of the industry that has a deep, abiding effect on the representation of women in comics. Marshall McLuhan observed that the “formative power in the media are the media themselves, that raises a host of large matters…namely, that technological media are staples [of our society].” (McLuhan, 116) This implicates the nature of media in and of itself, as well as the potential power to change itself as technology and society change. However, as it stands, comics as a medium are changing slowly. Nevertheless, the goal of this project is to study and assess the nature of the changes that have been taking place and to disseminate this important information in a compelling online platform, with the hope that in some small way this might influence and encourage wider representation of women in fans, creators, characters and individuals within the industry. The concentration of the fall project is a widely known author, Kelly Sue DeConnick, and two of her characters that are excellent portrayals of women in comics. The first, Captain Marvel, is a recently revamped character that was widely mistreated by male authors in the 90’s, Carol Danvers. The second, Death-face Ginny, is a the eerily violent protagonist of DeConnick and her long time partner, Emma Rios’s, magical realism
The spring project concentrates on a more bilateral analysis of the industry as a whole, concentrating on the representation of women in comics in both a modern and historical context.

As of the summer of 2014 at the ‘big two’ comic houses, only 11.1% of creators at Marvel were women, while DC barely trailed behind at 10.9%. This is down from 14.9% at Marvel in 2013. Furthermore, on the character front, female led series are a mere 12.3% of all Marvel comics being released right now. (Hanley) At a time when the entire genre of comics should be evolving, this entrenched disparity is remarkable and carries over to the recent upsurge in Superhero-themed films, television shows, and cartoons. On Facebook, “women make up just under half of all self-identified fans,” which means that almost 50% of all people buying comics, watching movies, and participating in the fanbase are female. (Yu) Yet there is no space created for them. There is a misconception in the industry that men will not buy comics written by women or with female protagonists, but that women will do the inverse. To a certain extent it is true, because women are reading comics from a wide range of authors with a broader range of sexist to feminist portrayals of women. For example, although *The Avengers* is the third highest grossing film of all time, the only female protagonist, Black Widow, is also one of the only two characters who are members of the team to not get a titular film. (Box Office Mojo) *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the sequel to the first one seems well on it’s way to matching, if not exceeding the original. Yet, in the film, Black Widow is reduced to little more than a love interest, who, in possibly one of the more sexist moments of comic-book movie history, compares herself to a monster because she was forcibly

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1 Marvel Comics and DC Comics are the two largest comic distributors out there at this time.
sterilized as a young woman. It does not help matters that the only two comic book films which starred women in titular role, *Catwoman* (2004) and *Elektra* (2005), were universally panned by both critics and genre fans as inaccurate, poorly written and nonsensical. Like many films in the genre, *Elektra* “was perceived that the studios were just casting ‘hot’ women in roles and not giving audiences a worthy plot or credible performances.” (127, Mainon & Ursini) This perception of female characters is true not only in film, but often even more fundamentally embedded in the comic book genre, where women’s bodies can be made to defy the laws of reality.

Women in comics are almost universally portrayed as sexual beings. This goes back to the very origin of comics, and the old sexist romance comics of the 1940-60’s, before there were any superheroes that were women whose narratives did not devolve into a love story. The nature of comics makes every series of images look like still frames from a film, carefully contrived to create the appearance of action and a narrative. As is often the case in modern comics, particularly of the superhero genre, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to-be- looked-at-ness.” (Mulvey, 837) This means that the presence of the male gaze is glaringly obvious, to the point where it becomes oppressive and can be difficult to move on from, in comics written and drawn by both women and men. It is most obvious in the manner in which the female body is observed, and framed, through the lens of the viewer. Kieron Gillen wrote and changed Emma Frost, from one of the most classically overly sexualized and under-developed characters in the *X-Men* series, to a complex and driven woman. Of his visual portrayal of her, he said,
“This includes the poses a character strikes. You could have a character reciting feminist theory, but if you’ve shot them so they’re leaning over to give a cleavage shot and come-hither eyes up at the reader, it overrules anything else you could be trying to do.” (Hudson [1])

Gillen is one example of a creator who is trying to change the manner in which women are perceived throughout the genre. However, there remains a pervasive sense of the male gaze and male privilege throughout many comics. Some of the most powerful writers and editors in comics are openly misogynist, or racist, but are so entrenched in the industry that there is no way to avoid them as an industry professional, and no way to eliminate their presence as a reader. The male gaze is all about power and possession, as much as it is about the objectification of the human body. A character like Carol Danvers, Captain Marvel, who is a strong, complex woman with one of the most complicated backstories in the Marvel universe, can become “a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look.” (Mulvey, 841) This fragmentation of the body versus the character is especially clear in comics, where the stories are told literally in pieces.

It becomes a question of what is necessary for the storytelling, versus what is perceived as needed for the consumer. The male gaze is especially clear in the ways that it applies to framing individual characters because of this fragmentation of the medium. Artist and illustrator, James McKelvie, said, “too often you see panels focused on a female character’s behind or chest, for no storytelling reason…you’re telling the reader is that the character’s primary reason for existence is titillating the (straight male) audience.” (Hudson [1]) This oversexualization of women leads to homogeneity across characters that coalesces most female characters into a frankly offensive stereotypes, as
well as making them difficult to discern individually. However, it is not only problematic that women are portrayed sexually, but they are often shown in terms of sexual violence. Whereas men’s development into a superhero is usually a tragic backstory laden with the death of family or a wife or girlfriend, or planet, the female origin story is full of violence, frequently sexual violence, as a motivation for saving wanting to become a superhero. Perhaps most prolific example of this, which was examined in my spring project, is the Joker origin story *The Killing Joke*, which also serves as an origin for Barbara Gordon, or Batgirl. In this comic, she is attacked, paralyzed, sexually assaulted and photographed by her attacker, the Joker; the explicit photographs are later shown to her father, and the reader, in an attempt to make her father insane. It is a deeply problematic storyline and the trauma from this late 80’s comic is only beginning to get dealt with in a healthy way. However, there are notable exceptions to this rule, Kamala Kahn, the new Ms.Marvel became a superhero because Carol Danvers, the previous Ms.Marvel, inspired her.

There have been efforts in the last 20 years or so to bring more awareness to the systemic mistreatment that women in comics receive, especially in the superhero genre. Gail Simone, who is a prolific creator in the industry, developed a website that details the systemic destruction of many female characters in comics. Called ‘Refrigerator Women’ after the particularly brutal death of the love interest in a 1994 issue of Green Lantern, wherein he returns home to find his girlfriend cut up and left in a refrigerator. She created this list “when it occurred to me that it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics…[these women have been] depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator.” (Refrigerator Women) The example that struck me most powerfully
was that of Captain Marvel/Ms.Marvel/Warbird, aka Carol Danvers. She is a strong, intricate female character, and has long been one of my personal favorite characters; but she is also one of the ones who have been repeatedly mistreated by the industry, at least until Kelly Sue DeConnick’s run at the character in both her *Captain Marvel* series. Out of the hundred or so characters on the list, Carol Danvers is an excellent example of the many failures and mistreatment of female characters in the genre. Over the course of her life, since her debut in 1977, she has been consistently objectified and essentially tortured. She has been mind-controlled, impregnated by rape in a strange mix of incest and time travel, had her powers and memories stolen and become an alcoholic to cope with the clearly horrific legacy she has been given.

Obviously, given this kind of content, over time comics have become more mature. G. Willow Wilson, writer and creator of Kamala Kahn, (*Ms.Marvel* (2104)) said that “it kills me that there are so few comics I’d feel comfortable sharing with…any kid for that matter…never before did it occur to me how bizarre that is — having to keep a kid *away* from comics.” (Hudson [1]) The increase of extreme violence, nudity and even sex in comics appears to be driven primarily by two things: the aging of the audience, and the objectification of women.

This objectification of women has been present in the genre since the 1940’s. Between the early 1940’s and the late 1960’s, almost all female characters in any genre of comics, not only the superhero ones, were named ‘Mary’ or some variation on a theme. They were universally white and, with the exception of *Wonder Woman*, were infantilized—their names would be an adjective and then girl. A particularly striking
comparison was in the *Amazing Man* (1941) comics, where the titular characters were called “Mighty Man” and “The World’s Strongest Girl.” (Robins, *Great Women*, 58)

Furthermore, many comic books that began as books starring strong, independent women who saved the world and drove their own narratives were converted into ‘romance’ magazines after only a few issues. These comics blurred the line between narrative and magazine, featuring beauty advertisements, sexist editorials and quizzes about kissing and love. The 1944 line of *Miss America* was “originally a comic book starring a teenage super heroine of the same name, by it’s second issue, Miss America had become a girls magazine featuring fiction, fashion and beauty tips, chatty articles about pop stars, and comics.” (Robins, *From Girls*, 23)

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the second iteration of *Miss America*, it does show an overall trend in comics, where women characters are perceived as not being capable of driving their own independent narrative, and female readers as having no interest. This exact instance of a complete overhaul of a female character does not exist in the same framework today, but there is an implication that there is something more masculine about comic books as a genre, when in reality “there is nothing inherently masculine about telling stories with words and pictures.” (DeConnick)

The later ‘romance’ comics were often not better than the first iterations of their 1940’s counterparts. Romance comics were widely distributed from the later 1950’s until the mid 1970’s where they were largely discontinued because of a lack of popularity after censure of comics in the 50’s, and the general transition into the direct market from wide distribution. However, there was an attempt by some creators to modernize their generally misogynist comic soap operas to reflect the changing social ground of the late 60’s and
early 70’s. Robbins describes their attempts as “embarrassingly clueless in their attempts to
deal with the new feminism, or as what was then called ‘women’s liberation.’” (From Girls, 81) Robbins paints these authors are ‘clueless’, however, what these comics show is attempt at an inclusionary narrative, that fails to come across because of a lack of understanding from the development teams. These overwhelmingly male development teams were trying to create a new subgenre of superhero comics, targeted towards women. Overwhelmingly they come off as misrepresentational and at times nonsensical.

For example, “Stan Lee, who is credited with writing ‘No Man is My Master’ for Marvel Comics romance book in the early 1970s seems afraid to even call it women’s liberation in the story. Instead he refers to ‘female freedom’.” (Robbins, From Girls, 81) However, by the early 80’s there was a push towards more feminist literature, even if there was not necessarily a woman as the protagonist. This is mostly illustrated in independent comics, like Hellblazer from Vertigo, Ms.Marvel from Marvel, or independent underground comics like Dykes to Watch Out For by Alison Bechdel.

The underground comics movement began after the transition from a broader, more accessible comic book market into a direct market system. In this system, comics were published for specific demographics, increasingly focusing the majority of not only their shelving space, but also their monetary resources, into the creation and distribution of comics aimed at white males. However, some, but by no means all, comics began publishing more feminist literature, there was an equal, if not greater, backlash to the integration of the feminist movement into comics. While many underground comic artists and writers worked with the aim of feminism in mind,

“male underground cartoonists understood as little about the new women’s
movement…(they) reacted to what they perceived as a threat by drawing comix filled with graphic violence directed mostly at women…who criticized this misogyny [and] were not especially welcome in this alternative version of the old boys club.” Robbins, From Girls 85

This notion of the comics industry as a boys club became more prevalent and most treasured during this era, and has remained prominent in all aspects of the industry.

There has been critical commentary and backlash to the creation of this exclusionary atmosphere in all aspects of the industry, from fans to creators. These acts of misogyny and anti-feminism spurred the creation of a counter culture in comics written for women, but it was all very much in the subculture. Mainstream comic culture, was and would remain a patriarchal structure that feeds itself by perpetuating a cycle of fan to writer/artist to creator that was, and to a certain extent, still is dominated by men. By the 1980’s some of the more overt violence against women had changed, leaving room, particularly in the independent industry, for progressive and industry altering works such as Dykes to Watch Out For. Bechdel achieved a lot by creating a wide and varied case of “characters [that] are real, and funny s only real people can be.” (Robbins, From Girls 103) Another part of that is the development of stories aimed towards a female demographic, and a part of it is the process of pointing out the misogynies and the violence towards women in comics. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Gail Simone’s Women in Refrigerators was one of the most prolific and critical sources of information regarding the past and present violence against female characters in the industry, and source of brief, but powerful messages about the poor treatment of female characters. Initiatives such as Women in Refrigerators in the 90’s, Dykes to Watch Out For in the 80’s, and Gerry Conway’s Ms. Marvel in the 70’s, in conjunction with a variety of other comics, have slowly worked to change not only the patriarchal boys club in the industry,
in part by incorporating feminist discourse into their comics.

Comics act well as a bridge between the mainstream and subculture, although those lines are becoming incredibly blurred in recent years with the popularity of superhero films, and other franchises such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. These comics work within the genre as a foundation for change and peace. For example, early additions of *Wonder Woman* “included a biography...of a woman identified as a real-life hero. These women include healers Elizabeth Blackwell, Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, and Edith Cavell, suffragist Susan B. Anthony, anti-slavery advocate Sojourner Truth and organizers Lillian Wald and Juliette Gordon Low.” (Robinson, *From Girls* 58) In this way, comics driven by female characters have often acted as a subtle pièce de résistance, even from some of the first titles. Furthermore, the feminist message follows some characters as they transfer from one writer to the next. Although this was not always the case with Carol Danvers, the first and the last writers of her character certainly grounded her in a feminist message, even if the art is at times disproportionally unrealistic. The author of the first *Ms. Marvel* issue, Gerry Conway, worked with his wife to give “Carol her powers in *Ms.Marvel* #1 in 1977, which is how we came to know Carol. But you know, she was the ‘Female Fury’, I mean it was—you think I’m about as subtle as a sledgehammer...” (DeConnick) In this case DeConnick is emphasizing the ‘radical’ politics of the 70’s and the feminist aspects that have followed this character through her development, with the exception of some offensive and misogynist storylines in the 90’s, to where her character is now.

My goal with this site has been, and will be, to create not only a safe space for women to explore and cultivate a greater understanding of the amazing and immersive
world of comics, but also to fulfill “the promise of the early internet was that it would liberate us from…all the oppressions associated with prejudice.” (Valenti) My ultimate goal with my thesis was to create something—and initially, I was not sure what—that emulated this idea, while mixing my passion for comic books, and the general representation of women within the medium. My interest in the representation of women in the medium began when I started reading comics in the mid 00’s. I started with graphic novels, but when I eventually got to superhero comics, the genre comic books are most well known for, there did not seem to be any stand-alone female character books. After a while, I stopped looking, and I stopped reading. My interest was reignited by the introduction of Black Widow in *Iron Man 2*.

From there, I started reading all sorts of comics. At the time, I was living abroad, so I bought whatever I could get my hands on in English—*Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Persepolis*, most memorably. My developing passion for comic books and graphic novels, and my own growth as a burgeoning feminist, drew me towards comics with interesting, complicated and intelligent female characters. With the introduction of Black Widow in *Iron Man 2*, I expected her to be the lead role in her own film, and I was surprised that never happened.

During the time I was considering thesis topics, none of the major distributors or Hollywood studios had made any announcements, nor did they seem to even be considering a film with a female lead. Since late August of this year, both DC and Marvel have announced female-led films. I considered a wide variety of topics for my thesis, from the development of a feminist web comic about zombies to a photo collage of iconic feminist moments in comics. In the end, a website seemed to make the most sense, both
in terms of my skills and because I knew I wanted to create a space where I could share recommendations for comics and explore different characters. My goal was to create a site where people can find grounding in comics, if they have no experience, but also maintain interest in the site as they become more experienced in the genre. In order to achieve that balance, an important part of the process was developing a sort of special interest section – in this case, the Creator section with an interview and recommendations of related comics.

Very early on, I knew I wanted to find an artist who is writing or creating art for a progressive, popular comic with a female character as the titular role. This process was narrowed from a very wide pool, to a focus on a few artists, with Kelly Sue DeConnick \textit{(Captain Marvel, Pretty Deadly)} at the forefront. After contacting her in October, through multiple platforms, I was able to set up an interview via the phone. We spoke for 30 minutes, and that content is now up on the site.

Once I had the concept, a website about the representation of women in comics, I used tools I learned in my advanced production course, Web Design and Authoring, to fully develop a website. I began with simple wireframe mockups of the site, sketching about 10 different variations of what it could look like. Then, I brought those, along with a mock up of the color scheme and the fonts to be used, to the pitch. After getting feedback from my peers, I began to develop a higher fidelity mock-up of the site, based on the premise that there would be a sticky header at the top of the homepage, and a large carousel to showcase the material optimally. From these mock-ups, I began designing and coding for the website using a mixture of different media formats. For the development of the code itself, I used Adobe Dreamweaver. Throughout the semester, I spent time adding to my lexicon of HTML with elements of the HTML5 coding language, which I did not
know. It was a steep learning curve, but it came together in the end, and gave me a better understanding on not only the language, but also the development process of a website.

During the creation process, I used simple placeholders for all of my content, as that was the easiest way to fully develop the code around the content, and focus on the simple yet modern aesthetics that I was trying to create for the site—so the focus would be on the content. This sleeker, more minimalistic design, enables the reader to focus more on the words, and less on the formatting. I used a mixture of Photoshop and illustrator to develop graphical content for the website, but the majority of it was created using Photoshop.

When I initially developed the idea, I thought it would be possible to finish the website in about a month, and complete more than a single interview. I was disappointed that I could not get in contact with more than one creator in a substantive way. Additionally, the actual development of the website took literally three times as long as I had anticipated. The most major issue that I faced was that I hadn’t anticipated how long it would take to develop the overall style sheet (CSS) for the site, especially after the development of high fidelity mock-ups. Furthermore, the actual writing of the content had to be completed in a much shorter time frame that I anticipated because of the timing of the interview. With barely two weeks to spare, I managed to snag an interview with Kelly Sue DeConnick, and it was a really amazing experience, talking to one of my favorite creators who developed one of my favorite characters. However, after the interview, I realized that I had another problem. The audio footage was not good enough quality to create either a video or an audio file for direct consumption on the site, so I transcribed the interview for the creator page. Overall, it was an extremely time
consuming, exhausting and rewarding experience.

This project served as an excellent gateway into progressive feminism as a pseudo creator myself. The transition from the fall project, concentrating on specific creators and characters, to a larger, broader subject matter and audience was inspired, in part, by the controversy surrounding #Gamergate as well as my interview with Kelly Sue DeConnick.

Many creators, fans and industry professionals are doing amazing things in regards to the representation of female characters in popular and geek culture. However, there is still a wide swath of extremely angry, predominantly white male audiences who harass and demean both female creators and the characters they create. One instance of this in very near history has been #Gamergate, an ongoing struggle for female game reviewers that has culminated in defamation, bomb threats and an extreme amount of hateful rhetoric spewed all over public forums, such as Twitter. Anita Sarkessian, a self-proclaimed social justice warrior and victim of much of the intense hateful behavior said, “I think women are perceived as threatening because we are asking for games to be more inclusive.” *(The Colbert Report, 2:45-2:55)* By creating a space for women in the culture of videogames, and also comics, many men perceive their presence as a threat to the way things used to be, so the movement of #gamergate becomes all “about terrorizing women for being involved in this industry, being involved in this hobby.” *(The Colbert Report, 4:28-4:33)* The threats and attacks have gone further than just the Internet, but the inherent problem is the boys-club structure that pervades the ‘geek’ industries in a deeply insidious way, for example, “Game developer Brianna Wu “From the top down in the video game industry,” she said, “you have all these signals that say,
‘This is a space for men.’” (Wingfield) The Internet as a whole is meant to be a space for freedom of speech and freedom of expression, however even these safe spaces have begun to be permeated by the patriarchal nature of the industries that distribute films and comics and videogames.

#Gamergate served as an inspiration, because it showed the power and strength of will of dozens of high powered female creators and fans in an inflammatory, patriarchal context of the Internet. In my spring project, I wanted to interrogate this male-dominated space on social media.

Initially, I thought to expand upon the work that I had already done on my fall website by interviewing more creators and literally expanding the world and site that I had constructed in the fall—further developing the ideas and format that I had created across independent comics and potentially more into the superhero genre as well. However, that idea was not as involved as it could have been, and under the advisement of my advisors, I shifted my project to be more production based and encompassing in terms of content.

The second part of the process of developing the spring project was a script book for a short comic book based off of the format Scott McCloud’s Making Comics and Understanding Comics. I worked for weeks to try and parse a way to develop a narrative while at the same time, constructing a worldview that emphasized the importance of making feminist comics and the methodology involved in that. However, every iteration of a page or series that I would create felt abbreviated, oversimplified or campy. Nothing I wrote felt right, and what concept art and basic outlines I developed made me cringe. There is definitely something to be said for a visual medium such as a short comic book,
particularly as a meta-analysis of it’s own genre, however, it was not right for this project. The length and the attempt to create a broad, inclusive narrative over a series of particular and specific issues made this format impossible. However, I was able to use some of the content and ideas for the pages that I had written in the final version of my spring project, which merged the two initial ideas into one.

Returning to the initial idea of my fall project, a website about the representation and portrayal of women in comics, I shifted focus from creators and the industry side of things to a more content based series that mixes critical analysis with modern storytelling and information. Instead of creating a page and a comic based on each of the themes and in my second idea for a short comic book, I took elements from each page, focusing on breadth and depth in mixed visual/textual posts on social media. For the format of this project, I chose Tumblr, as it is a predominantly female Internet space, and a blogging platform that I am fairly familiar with. I used a customized theme to create a website-like feel, as opposed to a blog-like feel. Some of the themes that I covered more extensively are covered in this paper, but the main areas of concentration were categorized under four main headings: historical, modern, infographics, and making feminist comics.

The determination of the headings drove and segmented my research and the development of content for the site. I was able to concentrate on the content within the constraints of these themes, focusing on individual issues of comics, characters, as well as broader topics such as adaptations of comic book films and in one case, the genre of romance comics. This process constituted a simultaneous broadening and a narrowing of my thesis and the project. While I was able to speak broadly about a variety of different
topics, the way that media is dispersed on Tumblr means that the most effective posts are short, and rely on visuals to tell a narrative. Further challenges occurred when I was adapting my project for the gallery. In order to create a compelling image, I wanted to evoke the image of a comic book. In order to do this, I set up a projector against a black wall, and will be projecting the images from my blog on there. Following this experience throughout a year has been immensely rewarding, if frustrating at times, but in the end this project has been a really meaningful experience, and I plan on continuing posting when news and other concerns pop up.

Follow me at valkyrieshandbook.tumblr.com

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