

PART I



SEEKING JUSTICE

When I think of justice, images of a judge pounding a gavel and yelling “Order in the court!” come to mind. Modern concerns about laws and due process—whether for status, rights, or obligations—predispose us to think of justice in legalistic terms. We might also think of iconic Lady Justice, blindfolded and holding a balance and a sword, to signify objectivity, reason, and punishment.

These images may be representative of society’s expectations, but justice as a cardinal virtue carries a different definition, along with an exhortation to act.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says it is a “habit which perfects the will and inclines it to render to each and to all what belongs to them.”¹ That’s fair.

Fairness is part of it, but it’s a little more complex—the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states it a little more broadly: “Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the ‘virtue of religion.’ Justice toward

men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good” (CCC, 1807).

It’s about being good to our neighbors, but it’s also about giving God his due—we ought to do more than believe in God; we need to worship him.

The women in this section each manifest this virtue differently in their lives. Wonder Woman seeks the kind of justice we’re most familiar with—justice applied to society so it runs smoothly, good guys doing good things, and bad guys put away where they won’t cause harm. In Rey we see how pursuing peace promotes justice in a galaxy committed to seeking the common good. The saints offer us models of holy virtue. St. Katharine Drexel recognizes that despite a society built upon the common good, there are marginalized peoples everywhere that deserve, in fact are due, social justice. St. Clare’s witness as a true believer shows us how right and just it is to serve and worship God.



CRUSADERS OF JUSTICE AND LEARNING

WONDER WOMAN AND
ST. KATHARINE DREXEL

*Please take my hand. I give it to you as a gesture of
friendship and love, and of faith freely given.*

—Wonder Woman, *Wonder Woman* #167

I can't decide whether I want Wonder Woman's bracelets or her lasso of truth as my go-to accessory. She is prepared to kick ass with both in the 2017 release of *Wonder Woman*. I've been waiting a long time for a great action film featuring this heroine and so have a lot of women. While superheroines appear in recent blockbusters, characters such as Black Widow and Storm play supporting roles in ensembles. It's exciting to see a superheroine as the protagonist of the film.

I don't even mind the modern rendition that has altered Wonder Woman's origin story. In fact, I embrace it wholeheartedly. Comic book heroes have long been subjected to the *retcon*, short for retroactive continuity, to add, enhance, and sometimes change information in the character's canon in order to justify new storylines. Superheroes have been around for decades, some for almost a hundred years. Writers change, times change, and it all makes sense that the occasional deviation from the storyline might need to be explained.

Sometimes the retcon is artfully done and enriches the story, and other times it is gratuitous and the result of lazy writing. Wonder Woman has seen both. She debuted in December 1941, placed in World War II-storylines and working as a US Army in her secret identity as Diana Prince. Since then, Wonder Woman has been through at least four iterations in the comics and several more in television live-action and animation series. All these place her in different settings with different personality traits to better play into the social norms of the times. Diana has gone from warrior princess to ambassador and back again. She even lost her superpowers for a brief time and opened a mod boutique. *Yuck*. Yet I love that in spite of these changes her basic human dignity and desire to do good in the world remains. Wonder Woman is, and always has been, an advocate of justice.

The trend to reboot comic book characters' origin stories, that is, completely change their histories in order to better fit new social expectations or take the stories in new directions and interpretations, has affected Wonder Woman too. While the new Wonder Woman, daughter of Zeus, jumps into the scene as a formidable force in the world, the original Wonder Woman, crafted from clay, still intrigues me. While I know that an updated version of Wonder Woman likely appeals to

modern sensibilities, her origin story attracted my curiosity. I wondered how she changed over the years and what contributed to the traits we see on the big screen today. After all, I'm not the same woman I was thirty years ago or even ten years ago. To better understand her impact today, I needed to know her beginnings.

FEMINIST ICON? NOT SO MUCH

I read my share of comic books when I was a girl, and I watched the Saturday-morning and after-school animated series that were developed as a response to the comics' popularity. I knew the Wonder Woman from the 1960s and 1970s—a Wonder Woman who fought alongside Batman and Superman and worked as Diana for the United Nations. I didn't see her as a feminist icon but rather as just another superhero.

Those stories definitely encouraged my interest in science fiction and in more complex stories as I got older. By the time I was in college and majoring in English, I was drawn to reading materials that weren't mainstream. I enrolled in many special topics courses in science fiction, genre studies, and one of my favorites at the time, a women-in-literature course. Ever pushing the envelope, I chose to do my research on comic book heroines and focused on Wonder Woman. She proved to be a disappointment. I found she was written in a cheeky style that was sometimes too preachy and other times too meek for me to believe she was a superhero. I dismissed her for decades.

Years later, my interest in her was piqued when I heard that producer Joss Whedon was working on a Wonder Woman feature film. Whedon had written and produced the popular series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as well as *Firefly*,

one of my favorite sci-fi television series. His characters in both series are complex and strong, so I was excited to see his vision for Wonder Woman. The Wonder Woman project was ultimately scrapped, but through the intriguing possibility of this project I rediscovered Wonder Woman.

This time, I had a different angle for appreciating Wonder Woman. Not only had I matured, I also had the confidence that comes from success in my vocations. I was happily married, launching my kids to college, and enjoying a renewal in my career. That seed of curiosity, and if I may use the word, my *reconciliation* with my earlier views of Wonder Woman, left me wanting to read more about this heroine. I thought Wonder Woman had the potential to be a great role model for the twenty-first century: she embodied the gifts of womanhood in a way that contrasted with many discussions of gender in the public forum.

Wonder Woman's creator, psychologist William Moulton Marston, wanted a heroine "who would triumph not with fists or firepower but with love."¹ This concept for the character intrigued me, although I admit it took me many years to not only accept this but also understand it in a heroine. Superman didn't have to love anyone. Respect, yes. Admire, maybe. But love? I hadn't realized the importance of love in a superhero when I was a young woman. I got it now that my maturity included a growing understanding of my faith.

The more I encountered St. John Paul II's writings about the feminine genius and the special gifts of women, the more I looked with a discerning eye at the kinds of role models I had been selecting in the past. As a young woman, I had turned to mainstream characters in popular culture for cues about my feminine identity. These include some of the fictional characters I discuss here. I still like these heroines. There's much to admire in their virtues, but now I see that

they fulfill only a piece of what I desire in a role model. These heroines, with Wonder Woman at the forefront, lead with a profound sense of their mission to protect the weak and vulnerable in society. I became drawn to saints who exhibited the same traits but also desired to fulfill God's will in their lives. I had been putting my stock in fictional characters when I had the Communion of Saints for true inspiration.

FROM PSYCHOLOGY TO COMICS

Marston is perhaps best known as the creator of the technology behind the lie detector (knowing this, I think it's pretty funny that Wonder Woman uses a lasso of truth). His work was not in studying literature but in studying people. Much of his initial research focused on honesty in the workplace and the hypothesis that women tended to be more honest than men in workplace settings. His work was discredited for not following proper scientific protocols, but his anecdotal findings helped him begin to formulate the basic traits that would one day lead to the creation of Wonder Woman.

Max Gaines, publisher of the forerunner to today's DC Comics, hired Marston as a psychological consultant. From there, Marston started writing for Gaines and eventually suggested the creation of a female superhero. Marston took his inspiration for this superhero from the inroads made in women's suffrage and from America's emerging feminism movement. Marston executed this plan for a modern female hero by the end of 1941. It was this Wonder Woman that I read in my feminist undergraduate days, and it was also this preachy and meek Wonder Woman that made me sad. She was designed to be the new superwoman. Conceptually she was, but in execution, the writing and artwork lacked continuity with this vision.

Different illustrators, all men, drew Wonder Woman, so there were aesthetic differences in her appearance ranging from modest to sexy. Perhaps the intent wasn't to create a pinup girl, but Wonder Woman definitely shows more skin than the male superheroes. The writing, too, failed to live up to the potential for this groundbreaking character. Although she managed to extricate herself from dangerous situations, Diana was often portrayed as a damsel in distress. Marston might have envisioned a new kind of hero, but he and the other writers put Diana into situations where her leadership was not explored. The visionary Marston still acquiesced to societal expectations.

Nevertheless, Marston believed women would emerge as excellent leaders because they had uniquely feminine attributes that brought sensitivity and nurturing to the forefront of their interactions. In defending a superwoman to counter the parental complaints about violence in comic books, Marston said, "A male hero, at best, lacks the qualities of maternal love and tenderness which are as essential to a normal child as the breath of life."² He believed that women's relational skills complement the aggressive traits exhibited by male superheroes. Wonder Woman didn't just capture the bad guys and foil their plans; she spoke to them and appealed to the good in them. This difference was overt enough for me to come away with the feeling that she was too preachy when I first read her. In fact, Wonder Woman's maternal instinct was often the highlight of the storyline. In later readings though, I was surprised to find inklings of St. John Paul II's feminine genius in Wonder Woman!

As a young feminist first reading about Wonder Woman, I wanted to reject all the feminine trappings exhibited in the character. I wanted my heroes, male and female, to be interchangeable. I didn't want a heroine with intuition. I

didn't want a heroine who spoke softly and listened. And I certainly didn't want a heroine in a skirt: that just added insult to injury. And yet, even in skirts, Wonder Woman commanded respect and was an influential addition to the superhero universe. If nothing else, the mere presence of a female character in the midst of this male-dominated genre made the statement that women had a place in this world, that in fact women *were* a part of this world. I owe much to that Wonder Woman, even if at first I didn't like the traditional roles she embraced. I was especially annoyed with her joining the Justice Society of America in 1942. This organization of superheroes gathered together to uphold American values such as justice. However, what should have been an opportunity to showcase Wonder Woman's skills as a peacemaker within the fictional organization failed. The writers made her the secretary of the Justice Society and wrote her out of the action.

Eventually, I accepted that Wonder Woman had certain feminine traits, such as sensitivity, and that she was created to demonstrate how love is a powerful motivator, especially in her sincere care and nursing of Steve Trevor, her love interest. What I rejected was the condescending way Wonder Woman was sometimes written. Most of Wonder Woman's adventures fit a generic story arc. During the early years, she was mostly fighting the enemies of the United States. She would often be captured and bound, and then she would escape and take down the bad guys. The stories were at once forgettable and patriotic. There were stories where she definitely saves the day and others where she is relegated to supporting character. In almost every instance, however, her purpose was the support of the common good.

Those early years had a kind of split personality for Diana, which depended on who was her writer at the time.

For example, throughout her early years, Steve Trevor tries to get her to give up these activities and marry him. Diana entertained the idea of marriage in some storylines but in others rejected it, citing that she would have to give up her life of adventure as she knew it. Not only did these vacillations leave a bad taste in my mouth, but I also wanted to hear Wonder Woman tell me I could have it all: a family and a career.

Even though I wanted to be a strong feminist, I didn't want to give up the other side—I wanted to get married and have a family, and I would happily have given up my career to do it. Wonder Woman and I were on the opposite side of the feminism chasm created by the public discourse, which sometimes implied women could, and should, pursue careers instead of families. Part of me wanted Wonder Woman to show me I could have both. I went on to have both: a family and a career. On good days, I had it all. On bad days, I was at work, pining for my family, or at home, thinking about the things I left undone at work. I wanted justice for everyone, all the things my family and students deserved, but I felt like the loser.

Wonder Woman, like me, struggled to find her place in a man's world. She wanted to work for what is good and right in the world. Justice was more than an ideal, it was an attainable end, and she fought the good fight to promote it.

However, despite her fight for justice, I don't believe that Wonder Woman encompasses a completely feminist ideal. She leaves her home to take Steve Trevor, an injured pilot, back to the United States. She has fallen in love with him and first nurses him to health before becoming his secretary. I'd say her introduction to the United States was self-serving in spite of her subsequent contribution to the pursuit of justice.

Some feminists might take issue with Wonder Woman's motivation to pursue a man. The phrase "a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" became a kind of rallying call for feminists in the early 1970s, yet Gloria Steinem launched *Ms. magazine* in 1972 with Wonder Woman on the cover—the heroine whose *raison d'être* was Steve Trevor.

It seems to me that when it comes to Wonder Woman, we want it all. We want Wonder Woman to be strong, independent, and successful but also sensitive, nurturing, and feminine. As I, no longer a militant feminist, think about this today, I realize these seemingly contradictory desires might fit well with feminist ideals after all.

Surprisingly, they also fit well within the Catholic understanding of the new feminism. Wonder Woman drew strength from her feminine gifts. Marston's pitch to publisher Gaines hints at his personal feelings: "Look, if you had a female superhero, her powers could all be about love and truth and beauty, and you could also sell your comic books better to girls. And that would be really important and great because she could show girls that they could do anything."³ Marston knew that a woman's nature was different from a man's. Not better, but different.

ENCOMPASSING THE FEMININE GIFTS

William Marston's desire to create a superwoman introduced a new dynamic to the otherwise all-male heroes in the comic book genre. Nevertheless, Wonder Woman never became that superwoman. Her character's development was flawed almost from the beginning and was destined to fail because of sloppy continuity by writers who never