Damsels, Babes, and Heroes: The Evolution of the Female Avengers from *Avengers* #1 to *A-Force*

Compared with their modern incarnations, the superheroes that graced Marvel Comic’s first *Avengers* issue would be drastically different, almost to the point of being unrecognizable. This is partially due to the fact that costumes and drawing styles have altered over the years; the Lichenstein-influenced, garishly-colored characters differ vastly from the smooth, well-rendered images featured in today’s comic books. However, the disparity between the two is also a result of how the characters themselves have changed. Most Avengers, for example, are no longer campy, absolutist heroes with melodramatic dialogue and a simplistic view of morality. Rather, most Avengers are garbed in sleek, modern bodysuits, speak realistically, and are willing to operate in ways that are not clearly right or wrong. The same is true when it comes to gender in the Avengers, as the latest versions of the superhero team—such as A-Force—are vastly different from the founding team in this regard. The founding team features only one female, the ditzy, ultra-feminine Wasp; A-Force, on the other hand, is comprised entirely of women. More notably, however, the original team adheres much more strictly to traditional gender roles than A-Force. In the early issues of *Avengers*, male characters are assertive, logical, and—most importantly—the one who always save the day, while their female teammates play the inverse role. That is, the female Avengers are passive, illogical and dominated by emotions, and are almost always the ones who have to be saved. This is in stark contrast with more modern
Avengers teams, who take a more egalitarian approach to gender roles, especially for their female characters: every character on modern Avengers teams, regardless of gender, has the chance to save the day. Female Avengers are now, in short, allowed to function in the same roles as their male comrades, demonstrating how much the female Avengers have evolved over the decades.

The growth of the female Avengers is most evident when considering Janet Van Dyne, AKA The Wasp. Certainly, she is not first superheroine; in the 1940s, the ageless Fantomah became the first female superhero, followed shortly by the popular, widely-recognized Wonder Woman. Neither was she Marvel’s first female hero. That honor went to Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four, the first superhero group created by Marvel. Wasp is instead the first female Avenger; in fact, she is a founding member of the team, alongside Thor, the Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, and the Hank Pym Ant-Man (Lee 1). Just because she fights alongside these male characters, however, does not mean that Wasp is depicted in the same way as them. Upon examination, quite the opposite is true. Unlike the male Avengers—including her future husband, Ant-Man—Wasp is shallow and mindless, preferring to chase men or “powder her nose” rather than protect Earth (Darowski 206). She withdraws from battle to ensure to touch up on her makeup, and is constantly flirting with her fellow Avengers, even though she is in a relationship with Ant-Man (Darowski 205). It would not even be unreasonable for one to state that she is more of a nuisance to the group than she is a contributing member, for in addition to neglecting her heroic duties to flirt or bolster her vanity, Wasp is in need of constant rescue. As easily as the Iron Man or the Incredible Hulk dispatch villains, Wasp finds herself totally helpless in the hands of those same villains (Darowski 205). Unsurprisingly, it is the male Avengers who must come to her rescue, asserting their own masculine strength while magnifying
her weakness. After all, Wasp would not need rescuing if she had strength; neither would Ant-Man nor his teammates be required to rescue her if they were themselves weak. “Wimpy” characters do not do the rescuing, just as strong characters can never be categorized in the “damsel in distress” archetype. In fact, the early portrayals of the Wasp perfectly embody the role of a “damsel in distress”—in complete contrast with the capable, independent heroines of A-Force.

More troubling than her “damsel in distress” role is Wasp’s apparent ineffectiveness as a hero. Largely, this is due to her “damsel in distress” tendencies; after all, she cannot be an effective heroine if she is always the one being rescued rather than the one doing the rescuing. However, Wasp’s ineffectiveness as a hero can also be traced to her actual “super powers.” Like Ant-Man and Iron Man, Wasp’s abilities stem from technology, not from her body (unlike the Hulk’s) (Darowski 204). Instead, both Ant-Man and Wasp rely on Pym particles located in their suits to shrink themselves to the size of an insect (Darowski 204). This ability is of little use in the brawl-style battles Avengers co-creator Jack Kirby was fond of drawing, which featured character striking each other with fists rather than with weapons or energy blasts—thus, in *Avengers #2* Ant-Man’s powers were expanded to allow him to grow to the size of a giant (Darowski 206). Wasp, on the other hand, is limited to shrinking (Darowski 206). Granted, she is also able to shoot burst of stinging energy at her foes, an ability that earned her the title of Wasp (Lee). However, Wasp’s energy-bursts are just as ineffective in combat as her shrinking ability. Rather than repel an enemy, her stinging blasts only annoy an enemy, distracting him while the male heroes can sweep in to save the day (Darowski 205). As result, Wasp is marginalized, restricted to the sidelines of a story in which she should, according to her status as an Avenger, play an important role. She should be one of the primary attractions, one of the starring roles—
but instead, she is limited to being a secondary character. From the day the first issue of the issue of the *Avengers* was released in 1963 until the 1970s, Wasp is, at the end of the day, a sideshow (Darowski 205). The male Avengers—“real” heroes—are the main act.

This type of female marginalization, which continued through the 1960s, was by no means an arbitrary decision on the part of comic writers. Neither was it simply influenced by the cultural standards of the time, although these did play a significant role. Wonder Woman, after all, had been allowed to flourish and display her feminine strength in the 1940s, a far more conservative time (Madrid 46). Even Lois Lane, who boasted no superpowers, had not been as insignificant or weak as Wasp (Madrid 68). However, by the time the mid-1950s began, the trend of depicting capable female characters in comics would almost fade to nonexistence, with dependent, emotionally-fragile superheroines dominating comic pages until the mid 70s (Cook 191). No longer would Wonder Woman fearlessly fight evil, wielding the same courage, strength, and nobility as her male counterparts; instead, even the heroic Amazon would be placed on the sidelines (Madrid 128). In fact, Wonder Woman would almost be forgotten from the mid 1950s onward, as children became disinterested in her less bombastic personality and adventures (Madrid 128).

The influence that so marginalized comic book women (almost to the point of destroying comic’s most iconic and dynamic heroine) did not ultimately come from forces outside the comics industry, though they did play a role. Rather, the threat to female superheroines arose from the comics industry itself with the establishment of the infamous Comics Code Authority (CCA) (Cook 190). Granted, comic companies did not adopt the CCA with the intention of marginalizing their female heroes; that was merely an unfortunate side-effect. By adhering to the code, comic companies actually aimed to save their industry from government censorship,
believing that the self-censorship of the CCA would allow them far greater freedom (Cook 190). However, although adopting the CCA prevented companies such as DC from completely going out of business, it did greatly depress their sales (Cook 191). This perhaps was the intended effect of the code: both parents and the American government, who feared that comics were to blame for the rise in juvenile delinquency, would have breathed a sigh of relief when the industries they blamed for “the corruption of the innocent” were left floundering (Cook 190).

They must have also been pleased by the lack-luster, docile material comic industries produced under the constraints of the CCA (Cook 190; Madrid 57). Rather than containing all of the fun, dynamic art and fantastic adventures that had captured the imaginations of children since the late 30s and early 40s, comics were now stilted, dry, and uninventive as the authorities who were so threatened by comics (Madrid 57). Most likely, this is because comics no longer sought to capture imagination; their main aim was now to ensure that children conformed to expected behaviors, not engage in play or fantasy. In a way, the CCA forced comics to adopt the moralistic, pedagogic approach to childhood that had dominated children’s literature prior to the 20th century, recreating the world writers such as Lewis Carroll and L. Frank Baum had worked so hard to dismantle (Baum 1; Carroll 60). Indeed, comics had become much like the Duchess in Carrol’s *Alice in Wonderland*: they were always spewing out morals (Carroll 60).

Primarily, the moral lessons comics sought to impart were not bad in and of themselves. In fact, many of the CCA regulations promoted pro-social themes, such as the fact that crime could not be glorified and that the sanctity of family had to be upheld. (Cook 191) Unfortunately, the promotion of such values limited what types of stories and characters could appear in comics, meaning that anything that appeared contrary to pro-social ideas was promptly censored. Homosexuality, for example, was seen as a threat to society at the time; as a result, any material
that appeared even remotely homoerotic had to be altered, or completely excised (Madrid 57). Likewise, women operating in roles other than those approved by society—that is, any role besides wife, mother, or homemaker—was strongly discouraged from appearing in comics, as doing so was perceived as antisocial and detrimental to America’s moral foundation (Cook 191). In effect, this meant women could no longer be the heroes, the ones fighting alongside the men as equals—or even fighting alone. No more Wonder Woman being heroic on her own; no Lois being the gutsy, outspoken reporter. Rather, the CCA explicitly opposed such portrayals of femininity—and even discourage female depictions altogether. “The depiction of women,” states the code, “is strongly discouraged”—a recommendation that, obviously, excluded women from the front lines of comics (“Code of Comics Magazine Association of America”). Even in cases where women were included in comics did not permit women to function in the same foreground roles as men, for the CCA had also set guidelines for this action: if women were to be included in comics, they could not be featured prominently (“Code of Comics Magazine Association of America”). They instead were to be limited to secondary characters, with minimal time in the spotlight—which is precisely the situation superheroines like Wasp faced throughout the 1960s (“Code of Comics Magazine Association of America”).

Despite the CCA’s limitations on female characters, Wasp would not be the only female character added to the Avengers roster in the 1960s. In 1965—two years into the Avengers’ testosterone-dominated run—Stan Lee and Jack Kirby introduced two new characters to the team, a pair of twins by the names of Pietro and Wanda Maximoff (Madrid 160). Both are of Romani and Jewish decent, and unbeknownst to them, they are also Mutants, individuals who derive their power from genetic mutations (Madrid 160). Pietro’s mutation affords him super-speed, and chooses the appropriate superhero title of Quicksilver; Wanda, on the other hand, has
much less physical powers (Lee n.pg.). She, like the Wasp, has powers that are of little avail in the brawl-style fights of early Avengers comics: she can cast “mutant hexes” (Lee n.pg.). In fact, her hexes are not even formidable or effective in and of themselves. Instead, Wanda’s hexes are similar to Wasp’s shrinking powers and stinging blast in that they limit her to the sidelines. There is no fighting on the frontlines for Wanda; all that she can do—all she is capable of—is standing on the edge of the action, moving her hands in vague motions as she casts another hex (Lee n. pg.). With such limited powers, one begins to wonder why Wanda ever adopts the title of “The Scarlet Witch” in this time period, for her powers fade in comparison to other fictional male sorcerers or spell-casters. Even Harry Potter, who is likely half the age of The Scarlet Witch when she first joins the Avengers, can wield more potent mystic powers.

Unlike Wasp, The Scarlet Witch is not enamored with her male teammates. Neither does she seem intent on securing a husband, in direct contrast to Wasp’s fixation on matrimony. By the end of the 1960s, in fact, The Scarlet Witch has no romantic relationships, meaning that she remains “her own woman” throughout this decade. However, her perpetually single status in the 60s does mean that she is independent in this era. Quite the opposite is true: throughout the 1960s and until his abrupt leaving of the group, The Scarlet Witch is completely subservient to her brother (Madrid 160). Granted, she is not a “damsel in distress” who often needs to be rescued by her twin, unlike the helpless role the Wasp initially plays—but she submits to him as if she is every bit as incapable as her fellow female Avenger. Rather than being assertive or simply stating her opinions, The Scarlet Witch responds to Quicksilver’s commands with a passive “as you wish”; if he wants to do something brash or ill-advised, she simply stands by and lets him do as he pleases (Madrid 160). To have her do otherwise—to speak for herself—would not only incite the wrath of the CCA, but perhaps that of society. At this time, after all,
traditionally oppressed groups (women, African-Americans, gays, etc.) were encouraged to remain silent, to not assert or speak up for themselves (Jones, et al. 603). They were instead meant to continue living in their subservient state, to play the role of servant to a domineering master, with any attempts to do otherwise culminating in unpleasant consequences. When Martin Luther King, Jr.’s voice became too loud, for example, he was forced to pay the ultimate price for a social transgression: his life (Jones, et al. 641).

Change, however, was not impossible. It was difficult, certainly; Civil Rights activists had to labor tediously to achieve meager victories, for example (Jones, et al. 604). However, minimal changes are still better than no change at all—a situation the female Avengers were in the midst of throughout most of the 1970s, particularly the early half of the decade. By the end of the 60s, The Wasp’s powers had increased slightly, to the point that she no longer requires Pym particles to shrink (Lee n.pg.). This allows her to become a more active member of the team, but only for a time: after marrying Hank Pym, Wasp opts to temporarily leave the Avengers (Darowski 205). She has, after all, finally acquired what she was seeking—a husband—so she has no need to remain with the team. In the 1970s, however, Wasp is apparently unsatisfied with the purely domestic life that was stridently expected of women at the time. Rather than remain at home while her husband—who was now become the grayer character Yellowjacket—saves the world, Wasp decides to once more embrace the life of a superheroine; she once more helps to “save the day” from super villains and monsters, only without immediately returning the testosterone-heavy Avengers (Madrid 151). She instead joins the short-lived Lady Liberators (who were created as a parody of the feminist movements gaining strength in the 1970s) proving that she could indeed act independently of a man (Madrid 151). Moreover, Wasp’s brief stint with the all-female Lady Liberators demonstrates that women can be motivated by goals greater than
“finding a man” or being fashionable; their choices as heroes can instead be driven by the same
desire for justice that fueling male heroes. That is, she is allowed--for once--to be a true hero.

Certainly, this may not have been the writer Roy Thomas’s’s intent when he wrote the single Lady Liberators issue, titled “Come On In…The Revolution’s Fine” (Madrid 150). Indeed, the parody of the women’s liberation movement that flourished throughout the 1970s mainly portrays the movement negatively, depicting women’s rights activists to be nothing more than angry, hormone-fueled protestors. The entire plot of the issue, for example, involves the villainess The Enchantress posing as the Valkyrie (a fellow female hero) and tricking the female Avengers into incapacitating their male comrades, convincing them that the men are “holding them down” (qtd. in Madrid 151). Furthermore, the way the so-called Lady Liberators dispose of the male Avengers is spiteful, angry, and even violent—which was, as it happens, the way anti-feminist groups viewed the women’s liberation movement (Madrid 151). When this is combined with the fact that the women are so easily tricked by simplified—if not stereotypical—“women’s lib” rhetoric, the effect is that the feminists revolutions looks at best idiotic and childish; at worst, they appear vindictive, man-hating, and even violent (Madrid 151). Either way, however, “Come On In…The Revolution’s Fine” dismissed the women’s liberation movement, suggesting that it is merely a passing phase or trend that women will “get over.” As male Avenger Goliath tells the former Lady Liberators after they break free of The Enchantress’s influence, “you birds finally learned your lesson about that women’s lib bull” (qtd. in Madrid 151)!

Although their approach to the subject was initially incorrect and based upon a desire for female superiority rather than equality, the female Avengers—along with their non-Avenger female friends, such as the Inhuman’s Medusa and Natasha Romanova, AKA the Black Widow—do not completely abandon feminist ideals, but instead slowly embrace them as the
decade progresses (Madrid 152). The Black Widow, a former Soviet spy and notorious femme fatale, seems particularly eager to embody what it truly means to be a “liberated woman” (Madrid 156). Unlike the 1960s Wasps, she is not dependent on men to rescue her from danger, nor does she merely fight to spend time with—or acquire—a boyfriend; instead, she fights villains and crime for the sheer excitement of doing so (Madrid 156). Her 70s garb is more sensual than previous heroine’s costumes, consisting of a black leather jumpsuit that clings to her svelte form, but she dons it to appease her own sense of style rather than to gratify men (Madrid 151). Neither does the ex-Soviet reject men; when she defects from the Soviet Union and becomes an ally of the Avengers, she fights alongside and eventually falls in love with Hawkeye, who had already joined the team (Lee n.pg). In fact, Black Widow engages in numerous romantic relationships over the decade—but unlike the pre-70s Wasp, these relationships did not define her (Madrid 152). Rather, Black Widow’s romances are driven by her own desire for love rather than a need for or dependence upon men, demonstrating that she can be independent without being cold or emotionless. By the time she officially joins the Avengers in 1974, she is the ideal marriage of strength and independence that true feminist movements sought to possess, while avoiding the pit-falls of misandry and anger that caused some to demonize women’s rights movement (Madrid 152). She, in the end, is the exact opposite of what many anti-feminists believed the woman’s rights activist to be; that is, she is neither man-hating nor masculine. She is instead balanced, a harmony of an independent attitude with feminine style and emotions.

While some of Black Widow’s femininity—such as her desire to be sensual or to have romantic relationships—are the result rather than the cause of her independence, The Scarlet Witch’s love-life actually serves as the agent that transforms the young mutant from a docile, submissive character into an assertive women who stands by her convictions (Madrid 161).
Unlike Wasp, she does not appear to be initially motivated by a desire for romance; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Quicksilver, after all, discourages any suitors from pursuing his “fragile” sister, asserting ownership of her sexuality (Madrid 161). However, the 1970s witness a change for the Scarlet Witch in this regard as she develops feelings fellow Avenger The Vision, an android/synthezoid who is grappling with what it means to be human (Madrid 161). Initially, both Quicksilver and Hawkeye resist the idea—Quicksilver resents someone else taking “possession” of his twin, while Hawkeye himself is actually infatuated with young mutant—meaning that The Scarlet Witch must fight to even establish a relationship with The Vision; she has to resist her brother while informing Hawkeye that she does not reciprocate the archer’s feelings (Englehart n.pg.). Furthermore, she faces opposition from a society that resents both her status as a mutant (a much loathed ethnic group in the Marvel universe) and her interspecies relationship with her android lover, reflecting the prejudice against miscegenation and interracial marriage that was still prevalent throughout the 70s (Madrid 161). *Loving v. Virginia*, for example, had only recently outlawed anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S., and the sentiments supporting these ordinances were slow to die (Jones, et al. 480). In fact, anti-miscegenation attitudes resulted in interracial couples being ostracized and discriminated against during the course of the decade, even to the point of violence (Jones, et al. 461). However, some of these couples were able to overcome the prejudiced attitudes of their time—just as The Scarlet Witch and Vision are able to do, thanks to the former’s assertive, staunch defense of their relationship. When she finally weds the android in 1975’s *Giant-Sized Avengers*, it is clear that her romance is characterized by anything but traditionally feminine docility or dependence on men, given that she lashes out against opponents of her marriage by issuing an ominous warning: “Look out” (Englehart n.pg.: Madrid 161).
Assertiveness and independence are not the only new traits the female Avengers develop during the 1970s; many of them, including The Scarlet Witch, receive upgrades in their power. This change, in fact, is a direct reflection and response to the evolving personalities of the female Avengers. For example, Steve Englehart, who succeeded “Come On In…The Revolution’s Fine” writer Roy Thomas as writer for *The Avengers*, believed The Scarlet Witch’s power expansion was only fitting given her new-founded assertiveness (Englehart n.pg.). No longer is she confined to merely standing at the sidelines and using her vague hex powers; instead, the character whose title of “witch” was once barely applicable now possesses the powers of genuine sorcery, placing her at same level as magic-oriented characters such as Doctor Strange (Englehart n.pg.). Indeed, once Englehart grants Scarlet Witch the powers of true sorcery, it is arguable that she now rivals the Sorcerer Supreme in power. Although only Doctor Strange still has the advantage in regards to his ability to access alternate dimension, the nature of Scarlet Witch’s new power-set allows her to control chaos magic—a skill that, when fully developed, could make her virtually omnipotent (Bendis n.pg.).

So far, though, Marvel had yet to create any characters—much less female characters—whose abilities rivaled the powers of archetypal heroes such as Superman or Wonder Women. While the two iconic DC heroes were allowed to be almost godlike in their power-set (thanks to the feminist movements of the 70s, Wonder Woman gained popularity and mostly returned to her pre-CCA abilities and personality), most Marvel heroes were limited in their abilities, creating an element of realism and tension that the more powerful heroes failed to generate (Madrid 181). A character who can simply do everything, after all, can never truly be in peril; the reader usually knows that that character will find a way out, no matter how dark the situation appears. The less powered Avengers of Marvel, on the other hand, allow the reader to feel
anxious for the hero, fearing for his or her safety during a battle. Victory was not certain—but for Avengers such as Iron Man, Captain America, or even the recently upgraded Scarlet Witch, defeat certainly was. Some of the most high-powered Avengers, for example, were wounded in battle or almost destroyed. The Vision, in particular, is dismantled at the end of decade, despite possessing powers that come close to rivaling Superman’s abilities (Byrne n.pg.).

Near the end of the 70s, however, Marvel would not only receive one of its first Avengers with powers comparable to those of Wonder Woman or Superman, but would possess its first female Avenger with these abilities. Captain Marvel, who had been an occasional member of the team, certainly would have been the first to possess such abilities, as his alien physiology allows him greater strength and abilities on Earth just as Superman’s Kryptonian anatomy grant him similar powers (Madrid 177). However, the male Kree’s comic series failed to generate significant sales, leading to the cancellation of his series in the 70s (Madrid 177). As a result, Marvel was forced to find a new way to market high-powered characters, which they found in an unlikely source: Carol Danvers, former NASA security agent, current editor of a women’s magazine, and past love interest of the Kree Captain Marvel (Mizco 173). In 1977, Danvers embodied the ideal balance of strength and femininity so many 70s American women were working so hard to juggle; she is independent, bold, and yet undeniably feminine. A “modern woman,” she holds a high-positioned career, lives on her own, and wears fashion appealing to her own sense of style rather than to the tastes of men, subverting the conservative expectations for women dominating American life for decades (Madrid 178). Danvers even visits a therapist, an activity that was stigmatized in the 1970s—and, to a degree, still is today (Madrid 178). However, that same year Danvers discovers that her dynamic personality is by far the least extraordinary aspect about her: unbeknownst to her, she has an alternate personality by the name
of Ms. Marvel, who battles evil as a high-powered superheroine (Madrid 179). Her abilities, in fact, are similar to those of her former lover Captain Marvel, as her genetic structure unknowingly melded with the Kree’s during a radioactive explosion (Madrid 179). Consequently, she is now one of the most powerful heroes in the Marvel universe—even though she is unaware of this fact until her therapist helps her recover her memories of her alter-ego (Madrid 178).

It is precisely because of this bizarre origin story that Ms. Marvel’s early portrayal is both positive and problematic. On the one hand, Ms. Marvel’s very identity is a nod to female liberation, as the title “Miss” denotes an independence from men (Madrid 178). Likewise, her Superman-like powers and refusal to engage in typical heroine activities—such as obsessing over her male teammates—represents a significant step forward for superheroines; female heroes had previously been confined to lesser powers and to the “girlfriend” role, in which female heroes are primarily defined by which male hero they date. On the other hand, her origin as a dissociated identity of Ms. Marvel, along with the brusqueness of her dialogue, makes her appear to be both emotionally unstable and callous (Madrid 177). Emotionally stable people, after all, do not have fragmented consciousnesses or “black out” while an alternate identity fights crime. Neither do kind, warm-hearted individuals speak with the same terse, no-nonsense tone of Carol Danvers. Granted, Danvers is a military woman, and is accustomed to speaking in such a seemingly harsh manner (Madrid 176). She is not, in short, trying to hurt anyone’s feelings or be verbally abusive. Regardless of why she speaks the way she does, however, she still comes off as an abrasive, if not slightly off-kilter, heroine, making her instantly unpalatable to the reader. It is no small wonder, then, that her solo comic series was cancelled only after two years; a female superhero could not behave like a man without paying a price (Madrid 180).
If all female Avengers were to pay a price for their new-found liberation, they would begin their payment in the 1980s. Much like the political climate of the real world at the time, the female Avengers experience a backlash for making progress—albeit in a different form. The price of the social changes of the 70s was the conservative resurgence of the 80s, headed by President Reagan (Jones et al. 667); for female Avengers, the cost was experiencing adversity their male counterparts were seldom subject to. Wasp, for example, is physically abused by her husband, whose neurochemistry has been altered by his constant use of the Pym Particles (Madrid 222). The Scarlet Witch, who is able to conceive twin sons with her android husband through a hex, ultimately loses both children when it is revealed that they were merely part of the soul of the demon Mephisto (Byrne n.p.g.). In a controversial storyline, Ms. Marvel is impregnated—and gives birth to—Marcus, with the latter effectively raping Danvers to escape from Limbo into Earth (Madrid 178). Worse still, Ms. Marvel is attacked by the mutant Rogue shortly thereafter, with her attacking draining her of both her powers and her memories (Mizco 173). As a result, Danvers loses her identity—a phenomena that is not uncommon to superhero comics but does affect the female Ms. Marvel differently than it has impacted male superheroes. Wolverine, for example, loses his identity several times in storylines such as “Weapon X,” “Wolverine goes to Hell,” and “Enemy of the State” (Mizco 173). When he is in this memory-free state, however, he is not rendered completely helpless. Quite the opposite is true; often, a memory-wiped Wolverine is used to commit atrocities, turning him into the killing machine Weapon X (Mizco 173). Danvers, on the other hand, is made defenseless by her memory wipe, relying on Professor X to restore her consciousness (Mizco 173). That is, a man helps her reclaim her identity, seemingly undoing a majority of the feminist progress that was made during the 70s. The point of the women’s liberation movement, after all, was that women and girls no
longer needed men to define themselves, a notion that is symbolically contradicted by Professor X’s restoration of Ms. Marvel’s identity.

The adversity faced by Wasp, Scarlet Witch, and Ms. Marvel, of course, are not solely attributable to a desire to punish superheroines for the social transgression of female empowerment. In fact, a number of comics published in the 80s would become increasingly darker as their writers sought to appeal to more mature audiences; comics, after all, were no longer easily accessible to children. Instead, comics were now being sold directly to comics retailers, meaning that boys or girls could not simply purchase an issue of The Avengers at their local newsstand (Madrid 181). They would now be forced to do so through a parent visiting a local comic shop—and given the increasingly mature content of comics, it was unlikely that most mothers or fathers would actually buy a comic for their child (Madrid 181). In the hand of Frank Miller, both Batman and Daredevil became darker and more violent series, with the latter often featuring gory confrontations between the titular character and the cronies of the crime-boss Kingpin (Miller n.pg.). X-Men heavily emphasized the mutants’ ostracism and persecution, producing titles such as God Loves, Man Kills in which mutant adults and children are slain by an anti-mutant pastor (Claremont). DC’s crossover event Crisis on Infinite Earths saw the brutal death of Supergirl (Wolfman). Alan Moore, the British writer who penned relatively child-friendly series such as Miracleman and Swamp Thing, fixated on anarchist and dystopian themes in both V for Vendetta and Watchman (Moore). Furthermore, both of these works feature sexual content most parents would agree are unsuitable for children, with V for Vendetta depicting attempted rape and prostitution and Watchmen featuring sex and nudity (Moore). In fact, perhaps the most infamous element of Watchmen is the fact that the genitalia of one its lead character, Dr. Manhattan, are prominently displayed (Moore). Comics, which once were synonymous with
childhood nostalgia and innocence, were now almost too mature to capture the imaginations of the children who had driven the industry for almost fifty years.

In addition to an older target audience, the gradual erosion of the CCA played a role in the increasingly mature comic content. The CCA still existed during the 80s, of course; Marvel would not abandon it until the 1990s and early 2000s (Cook 190). The CCA of the 80s, however, was much less potent or stringent than the CCA of previous decades. Regarding sexual content in particular, the original CCA mandated that (1) “nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure”; (2) “suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable”; (3) “all characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society”; and (4) “females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities” (qtd. in Cook 191). By 1971, however, the CCA had relaxed, only officially keeping the fourth rule (Cook 191). It is debatable whether or not all comics followed this rule—certainly, some of Black Widow’s 70s depictions in her skin-tight leather costume seem to contrary to it—so it is unsurprising that by the time of the 80s, the CCA’s only remaining restriction on sexual content was “primary human sexual characteristics will not be shown” (qtd. in Cook 191). That is, the sexual content that could not grace comic pages were limited human genitalia; all other forms of sexual content were “fair game,” as it were. However, even this rule appears to have been ignored in Watchmen’s prominent displays of Dr. Manhattan’s genitalia, signifying that the CCA was—for all intents and purposes—dead (Moore).

For Marvel, the CCA was the last obstacle preventing the company from reaching a more mature audience—so with its effective demise in the late 80s, Marvel was largely free to do whatever it took to attract older readers. Sometimes, this was accomplished through grittier, more violent content, portraying heroes being maimed or killed in increasingly explicit ways. X-
Men’s *God Loves, Man Kills*, for example, depicts the gruesome hanging of two mutant children within its first few pages (Claremont). Under the pen of Frank Miller, Daredevil transformed from a C-list, slightly goofy character to a brooding, morally gray character that not only fights the world of organized crime, but does so violently (Miller). In Daredevil’s *Born Again*, in particular, The Man Without Fear is almost pummeled to death by arch-nemesis Kingpin with little attempt to soften or obscure the brutality of the crime boss’s onslaught (Miller). Occasionally, however, this gritty approach was not enough to attract the audience at which Marvel aimed. That is, this approach was not effective in and of itself. When paired with other adult themes, such as drugs, alcohol, or sex, violence was an extremely potent tool in drawing in the heterosexual adult males Marvel so hoped to attract. In the 1980s, after all, heterosexual adult males were typically the individuals who had enough money to buy comics, so no expense could be spared in making them part of Marvel’s readership (Madrid 222).

As the late 80s and early 1990s approached, Marvel learned that one approach in particular was effective in attracting the heterosexual adult male: sexually appealing women. The method was not new, of course; in an attempt to boost the flagging sales of her series, Ms. Marvel’s cheerleader-like costume had been changed to a leather bathing suit which exposes some of her back and rear, and clings tightly to her shapely form (Madrid 179). The CCA, in fact, most likely recognized this tactic as a feasible marketing strategy when it banned artists from exaggerating the female body. However, the “sexy superheroine” approach truly came into its element from the late 80s to early 90s, leading some to dub this time period as “the babe years” (Madrid 270). Indeed, the precedent set during this time would prove to be enduring, as sexualized heroines are still a staple of modern Marvel comics.
Although characters such as Ms. Marvel and Mystique played a role in setting Marvel’s “babe” precedent, the character who set the precedent in stone is the She-Hulk, who was created in 1981 and added to the Avengers roster in 1982 (Shooter and Michelinie). Possessing similar powers as her cousin, Bruce Banner/The Incredible Hulk, She-Hulk does not appear to be a likely candidate for the “babe” role; after all, her cousin is known to be anything but sexually appealing (Cook 189). In fact, some of She-Hulk’s original appearances make her seem every bit worthy of her series title, *The Savage She-Hulk*. However, even She-Hulk’s initially masculine and hyper-muscular design in *Savage She-Hulk #1* does not negate some of the sexual elements of her costume (Kraft). In her first appearance, for example, She-Hulk is shown to as she transforms from the ordinary Jennifer Walters into her green-skinned heroine persona, who looms several feet taller than Walters (Kraft). Consequently, the dress Walters is wearing torn by her growing body, similar to the way her cousin’s shirt and pants rip when he assumes his Hulk alter-ego (Kraft). Unlike Banner, however, Walters’s transformation serves more as an excuse to expose more of her green skin than as realistic detail or even a homage to her angrier, more monstrous cousin. Rather, with her neckline ripping all the way to her solar plexus, Walters transformation into the otherwise powerful and feminist character mainly serves as a way to expose She-Hulk’s sizable green cleavage to Marvel’s target audience—and chief buyers.

Near the end of the 80s and into the 90s, She-Hulk’s contradictory status as both a feminist symbol and sex object would become more pronounced, possibly more so for her than for any other comic book heroine. On the one, writer John Byrne—who became the principal writer for She-Hulk in 1989—layered and deepened the one-dimensional character of She-Hulk, making her more than just a female version of her cousin (Cook 185)). Under Byrne’s hand, she is no longer an irrational female who transforms into a feminized Hulk, but is an intelligent,
logical woman who finds ways to balance her occupation as a lawyer with her vocation as a superheroine (Cook 186). In fact, Byrne’s portrayal of She-Hulk’s struggle to “juggle” costumed heroism with practicing law is comparable to that of fellow Marvel character Daredevil, who acts as a vigilante at night but serves as a successful defense attorney by day (Miller). The way she is physically portrayed, on the other hand, is a completely different story. Where her characterization affords her the same complexity and competence as male heroes, the manner in which she is drawn completely overshadows her role as heroine and career-woman. When a male reader opens a copy of Byrne’s Sensational She-Hulk, for example, he probably is not instantly struck by how selfless, independent, or competent She-Hulk is. Instead, he is most likely drawn to and concerned with the heroine’s overt sexual appeal, such as her exaggerated curves, suggestive poses, and revealing costumes (Cook 187). Indeed, the act She-Hulk is most known for is not her fearless self-sacrifice in 2010’s Age of Ultron or even her murderous rampage in Avengers Disassembled, but is instead her decision to jump rope apparently naked in Sensational She-Hulk #40. (Bendis; Cook 187)). “Apparently” in this instance means that in actuality, She-Hulk is not jumping rope naked in the iconic issue; in a use of metafiction, Sensational She-Hulk editor Renee Witterstaetter rips away She-Hulk’s rope, revealing that the green-skinned heroine was clad in a bikini the entire time (Cook 188)). However, the fact that She-Hulk is ultimately revealed to be clothed does nullify the titillation heterosexual males experience while reading the comic, making it stand out more for men than the acts of heroism She-Hulk engages in afterword. She is, at the end of that issue and many others like it, remembered more for behaving like a stripper than she is for playing the role of a hero and Avenger.

Unfortunately, Marvel’s sexualization of its female super heroes did not end with The Sensational She-Hulk. Rather, the portrayal of superheroines as sexual objects became more
pronounced in the 1990s, to the point that many depictions of female heroes were comparable to real-world sex symbols of the time. Scarlet Witch, who had worn her iconic red bathing suits, pink tights, and opera gloves since her initial appearance, adopted a costume that resembled the overt sex appeal of Madonna’s outfit (Busiek). Ms. Marvel’s body is drawn to make her appear more toned and muscular, but not as a way to emphasize her strength or make her an equal of her well-muscled male comrades; in the end, her musculature only makes her comparable to the curvaceous, yet muscled figure of Baywatch’s Pamela Anderson (Madrid 278). Black Widow’s breast size is increased during the 90s, making her appearance comparable to that of Striptease’s Demi Moore (Grayson; Madrid 279). Most of the female Avengers, in fact, appear as though they undergo plastic surgery or breast augmentation in the 1990s. Where the superheroines of the 60s, 70s, and—for the most part—the 80s have both average breasts and body mass index (BMI, the ratio of weight to height), the breast size of female Avengers such as Black Widow and Ms. Marvel apparently increase two full sizes, while their waists and stomachs are hemmed in. Conversely, their hips are drawn wider, exaggerating the ideal feminine “hourglass” shape. This, after all, is what Marvel’s primarily heterosexual male readership wanted during the 1990s and 2000s: the ideal female body. Just as they had been attracted to Sensational She-Hulk by the titular character’s appealing figure than by her heroic exploits or dynamic personality, male readers were primarily interested in female Avengers who were the modern equivalents of the Venus of Willendorf, not ones who were as a strong and capable as their male comrades (Madrid 299). Strength and efficacy, after all, were—and to a degree still are—considered a man’s domain; having a female character that possess such traits would threaten men’s monopolization of these qualities.
Regarding women’s sexualization and threats to masculinity in comics, it is important to note that the more powerful superheroines become, their sexualization and “eye candy” status becomes more pronounced. When She-Hulk evolves into a more complex character in 1989, for example, she performs infamous naked jump rope scene in *Sensational She-Hulk #40*, in addition to posing on *Sensational She-Hulk* covers in *Play-Boy*-like garbs and postures (Cook 195). Shortly after Scarlet Witch becomes the leader of the West Coast Avengers and Force Works team, her body is idealized and her costume is reduced, allowing artists to showcase her sculpted thighs and sizable bust (Albert and Lanning). Ms. Marvel’s return to the heroics after her encounter with Rogue is coupled with her increase in breast size and overall BMI decrease (Mizco 174-176). At the end of the decade, Black Widow is allowed to play as prominent a role as her male comrades in her first solo series, *Black Widow* (1999)—but overall, her displays of strength and capability are ultimately undermined by artist J.G. Jones’s Pygmalion renderings of her form (Grayson). As a result, the female Avengers are reduced to objects, an assortment of body parts and shapes—but so much more than mere objectification occurs. By becoming objects, the female Avengers are dehumanized; by being dehumanized, they can no longer be heroes like their male teammates, or even be their equals. An object cannot be a hero, after all, or be equal with a man; only a person can do so.

Surprisingly, two medical students’ review of popular male and female Marvel characters—including some of the female Avengers—revealed that for the most part, the aesthetic and cosmetic alterations the female heroes receive in the 90s did not necessarily mean that a majority of them are underweight (Healey). In fact, the study showed out of the 25 women featured in the review, only 7 of those female heroes had a BMI that qualified them as underweight or even malnourished (Healey). Out of the female Avengers, the heavily-muscled
Ms. Marvel is surprisingly the only one who falls below the healthy 18.5 BMI; she sports a BMI of 17.33, while Scarlet Witch (20.72), Jessica Jones (19.46), Wasp (18.92), and Black Widow (20.56) fall either barely or securely into the healthy BMI category (Healey).

At first glance, this appears to indicate that the unrealistic standards imposed by the depiction of superheroines is not as bad or problematic as some say, for not all of the female Avengers have unhealthy body weights. Some would even say that compared to real world media advertisements featuring women, the female Avengers are significantly healthier, especially in regards to BMI. When one compares the review of female superheroes with the review of male male superheroes, however, it becomes evident that the rendering of Marvel women is still problematic. According to the study, none of male heroes is underweight; the lowest BMI is 19.09, with an average of 25.43 (Healey). As BMI is a ratio of height to weight rather than a simple measurement of weight or fat, the differences between the male and female heroes’ BMIs cannot be explained by the tendency of men to be larger and heavier than women (Healey). That is, the difference cannot be attributed to the fact that men are generally heavier than women, but is instead attributed to the reality that the ratio of female superheroes’ height and weight is generally lower than males’. For example, Spider-Man is 1 inch shorter than Ms. Marvel but is 43 pounds heavier, a difference that at first glance is caused by Spider-Man’s more heavily-muscled frame (Healey). Indeed, men on average have roughly 20% more muscle than women, while women have 20% more body fat (Healey). As muscle weighs significantly more than fat, men tend to weigh more—but typically, their BMI is not so dramatically greater than women’s, especially if they are close to the same height. Usually, a man’s BMI is only slightly larger than a woman’s of similar height; on average, the difference is around 2 points (Healey). However, Ms. Marvel’s BMI is 7 points lower than Spider-Man’s, indicating that Ms. Marvel’s
rendering does not represent the real world (Healey). Even the healthier BMI of Black Widow does not fall within the normal male/female difference; she is only 3 inches shorter than Spider-Man, but her BMI falls 4 points lower than his (Healey).

Besides the obvious concerns of creating unrealistic standards for girls and women, the female Avengers’ unreasonable BMIs create two other problems. The first is that expectations for female superheroes’ appearance are much narrower than male superheroes’, who can range from a BMI of 19 to one of over 30 (Healey). That is, men can vary much more in their appearance (especially their BMI) while women can only remain within certain narrow parameters. The second concern is that the aesthetic changes the female Avengers undergo in the 90s did not remain unique to that time period. Rather, the study—which was published in 2014—indicates that the unrealistic BMIs of female Avengers is an ongoing problem (Healey). In fact, low BMIs have been combined with increasing sexualization, such as revealing costumes or exaggerated sexual characteristics. In the 90s, for example, Black Widow’s breast size increases—but when her first solo series premiered in 1999, her entire physique is rendered unrealistically (Grayson). Her backside is more toned and shapely, her chest-to-rib cage ratio is much more dramatic, and her waist is narrower than it was in the past, or even in the early to mid 90s. Additionally, her costume becomes more revealing, with her skin-tight leather costume revealing the outline of her nipples—a detail that even most cabaret or men’s club advertisements do not usually contain (Brown 243). By the time she is featured in mid-2000s to early 2010s stories such as Secret Invasion (2007), Civil War (2007), and Infinity (2014), her leather body suit is consistently zipped down her to solar plexus, exposing her cleavage while she engages Skrulls, the Builders, or even other heroes (Bendis; Hickman)). Her male comrades, on the other hand, either maintain their 90s costumes or receive newer, less form-fitting attire.
Daredevil’s costume, for example, remains relatively unchanged; the only exception is that the “underwear on the outside” look that he sported throughout Miller’s *Daredevil, Born Again*, and *The Man Without Fear* series is abandoned (Miller). Hawkeye’s costume, on the other hand, is altered from a purple and blue spandex suit to a more functional—and less revealing—pants and vest (Fraction). This change is most likely made for cosmetic reasons—the spandex costume Hawkeye bore since his first appearance no longer looked modern or fitting to the times—but it is also likely that the alteration is due to the fact that men are typically threatened by any eroticization (or perceived eroticization) of male characters. Men, after all, tend to have a greater fear of becoming homosexual than women do, and are consequently made uncomfortable when the male form is sexualized. Women, on the other hand, can be sexualized without complaint from the primarily male readership—partly because this affirms their heterosexuality, but also because they are socialized to believe that the objectification of women is normal while the objectification of men is not.

There are exceptions to the trend of sexualized female Avengers in the 2000s, however. The most notable is Jessica Jones, who—unlike characters such as Scarlet Witch and Spider-Woman, who are shown before they join the Avengers—first appears after she leaves costumed heroism behind to become a private detective, although she occasionally returns to the Avengers in later stories (Bendis). In contrast with her friend and confidante, Ms. Marvel, Jessica Jones is not clad in a skin-tight suit with knee-high boots; in almost every issue of her solo series, *Alias* and *The Pulse*, Jones sports a leather jacket, a modest tank top, and loose, comfortable jeans (Bendis). In addition, Jones’s features are neither exaggerated nor sexual, but are instead believable and realistic. Her lips are not full and pouty, her waist is not hemmed in to create the ever-desirable hourglass shape, and her BMI is refreshingly average. In fact, according to the
aforementioned Marvel BMI study, Jones’s BMI is an inarguably healthy 19.46 (Healey). Compared with her friend Ms. Marvel, Jones is much more realistic and attainable in terms of body shape and size—especially considering that Jones manages to be both 4 inches shorter but 1 pound heavier than her heavily muscled bathing suit-clad comrade (Healey).

Regarding her feminist implications, Jessica Jones is both a positive and negative character. On one hand, her psychological complexity and perseverance make her a stronger and more interesting character than most other female characters—or even most male characters, for that matter. In one scene, she can be a foul-mouthed, jaded woman who buries her sorrows in sex and alcohol; in the next, she can be vulnerable, loving, and empathetic (Bendis). She struggles with strong emotions, a consequence of the PTSD induced by her eight-month-long captivity by the Purple Man, but she does not let emotions rule her (Bendis). Granted, she will occasionally allow her emotions to erupt, venting them on Scott Lang’s Ant-Man or her lover Luke Cage—but for the most part, Jones is logical and methodical, using her skills of rationalism to solve every case that finds its way to her desk (Bendis). Unlike the Scarlet Witch, she is even allowed to juggle motherhood with heroics, occasionally returning to costumed heroism while her daughter is in the care of her fellow Avengers (Bendis). On the other hand, it is precisely Jessica Jones’s status as a mother that marginalizes her, removing her from the spotlight that was created by Alias and Pulse (Edmunds 214). This is not necessarily because Marvel is trying to make an anti-motherhood statement, as many feminists are accused of making. To Marvel writer Brian Michael Bendis’s credit, he attempts to demonstrate that motherhood is neither a weakness nor an anti-feminist role, but is instead a life-affirming experience for any woman who chooses to have children (Bendis). Bendis even maintains Jones’s strength, intelligence, and complexity while she explores the world of motherhood—but ultimately, this is not enough to keep her in the
foreground. Having a baby does not allow her to actively seek out cases or fight alongside the Avengers, and as a result, she is no longer interesting. No reader—especially not a male reader—wants to watch Jones change her daughter’s diaper when he/she could be watching Hawkeye or Spider-Man battle an army of Skrulls.

Similar to Jones, Scarlet Witch’s experience with motherhood in the 2000s is negative. Unlike Jones, however, motherhood for her is not balanced with positive aspects; it is simply negative, just as her maternal experiences in the 80s were. In fact, the same storyline is even continued for the Scarlet Witch in *Avenger Disassembled*, beginning with Wasp’s open mockery of the mutant’s brief time as a mother (Bendis). To her surprise, Scarlet Witch hears this but finds she has no memories of ever having children; unbeknownst to her, her mentor Agatha Harkness erased her memories of her children when it was discovered they were shards of Mephisto’s soul (Bendis). Because Wasp so clearly remembers her time as a mother, though, Scarlet Witch decides she did indeed have children at one time—even though she cannot remember them. This belief leads her to seek the aid of fellow sorcerer Doctor Doom, whom she believes can help restore her forgotten children to reality (Hernberg). In order to do this, however, she and Doom summon an enigmatic cosmic entity which merges with the mutant sorceress—an occurrence that reaps ultimately fatal consequences. While the entity bestows great power upon the Scarlet Witch, granting her the ability to warp reality, it also influences her behavior and thoughts, making her believe that the Avenger were responsible for her children’s deaths (Hernberg). Enraged by this erroneous revelation, the Scarlet Witch begins unleashing her anger on her Avengers teammates, including her husband the Vision (Bendis). Along with Hawkeye and the Scott Lang Ant-Man, the latter character is killed at the Scarlet’s Witch’s hand
Indeed, if not for the intervention of Doctor Doom and Magneto, the sorceress would have slaughtered all of the Avengers—perhaps even the entire world (Hernberg).

This incident, like the entire character of Jessica Jones, does contain some positive aspects for women. The power Scarlet Witch possesses after her merge with the entity, for example, is far greater than most powers female characters have been allowed to wield. One could even argue that her powers surpass most of the male Marvel characters, including Professor X and Doctor Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme. The way in which she handles these powers, however, is not so positive. Unlike the capable Professor X or Doctor Strange, Scarlet Witch cannot control her powers; instead, they seem to have control over her. This may be due, of course, to the fact that her powers are much more potent than any wielded by Strange or Professor X; after all, neither character has possessed reality warping capabilities as powerful as those commanded by Scarlet Witch in *Avengers Disassembled*. In the following story *House of M*, both Professor X and Doctor Strange are even unable to combat the entity within the Scarlet Witch, with the former admitting she is too strong for him (Bendis). However, Scarlet Witch’s inability to control her powers ultimately implies that women cannot be trusted with power or status, for like the wicked queen in *Snow White*, female power is destructive and corrupting (Tatar 83). Normal women—women whose powers do exceed men’s—are safe, predictable; women who have the power of the men, or whose powers even surpass men’s, are not. They are the dangerous ones, the ones who torment Snow White or convince their husband to leave their husband to their children in the woods. In this case, they are dangerous enough to slay 3 Avengers, a feat that even supervillains such as Doctor Doom or Thanos have been unable to accomplish. The woman in power, in the end, is a greater threat than any of these antagonists.
Not all female Avengers were punished for wielding power in the 2000s and 2010s, however. Spider-Woman, who had been forced to the sidelines by a temporary loss of power, returned to super-powered heroics in the late 2000s, fighting evil with all the confidence of male heroes such as Batman or Superman (Bendis). In 2008, She-Hulk revives and leads the Lady Liberators, which transformed from a feminist parody to a team committed to the advancement of women (Madrid 314). Almost 30 years after her first solo series was cancelled in 1979, Ms. Marvel received her second solo series in 2006, devoid of the pitfalls that had plagued both the earlier solo series and the character herself throughout the decades (315). The 1979 solo series and Ms. Marvel portrayals through the decades, for example, commonly feature elements that prevented the heroine from achieving the same status as a male super hero. She is subject to rape, amnesia, loss of identity—and worst of all, the storylines in which she stared in 70 to mid-2000s had bad writing (315). Her 2006 series, on the other, finally removed these barriers. Rather than being a helpless victim or being relegated to the sidelines, 2006 Ms. Marvel is not only prominent, but vital—perhaps even more so than her male comrades, such as Luke Cage. In fact, Ms. Marvel emerges as the leader of the New Avengers after the dissolution of the original team in *Civil War*, preserving the Avengers cause (Bendis). As a result, the message to readers is the exact opposite of *Avengers Disassembled*: female power is not an irrational, destructive force, but rather a constructive, necessary aspect of the world.

The 2010s, however, proved to be an even more monumental time period for Ms. Marvel. 2012, in particular, saw Ms. Marvel finally become her own hero as she dropped the title “Ms,” exchanging it for the much more authoritative title of “Captain” (Mizco 174). Certainly, this change primarily functions as an homage to the original Captain Marvel; as he is deceased at this point in the storyline, Carol Danvers chooses her name to honor the fallen Kree warrior’s legacy.
(Miczo 174). However, the title change also implies that Danvers is no longer simply a female version of a male hero, unable to stand as a character with her masculine predecessor. Instead, she is allowed to be a heroine whose identity is independent of her male counterpart, to the extent that the name “Captain Marvel” no longer conjures images of the Kree warrior of the 60s and 70s. Indeed, it would be reasonable to argue that with the exception of die-hard fans, most Marvel comics readers are unaware that Captain Marvel was not always females. To them, she is not a “rip-off” like Batgirl or Supergirl, who are primarily defined by their links to male heroes; she is instead a heroine whose identity is independent of men, just like Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman, after all, never needed to achieve prominence or notoriety by succeeding a male hero.

It should be noted that despite some of the problematic implications of female Avengers adopting male Avengers’ titles, it is not always negative for a female Avenger to do so. The very premise of She-Hulk’s character is that she is, in both appearance and ability, a female equivalent of the Incredible Hulk. However, her character is not diminished for her “copy-cat” title, but instead flourishes despite it. The same is true of the Jessica Drew Spider-Woman, who becomes a major contributor to the Avengers after Secret Invasion (Bendis). Spider-Woman is exactly what her name implies—that is, a female version of Spider-Man—but she is not limited to this identity. One could argue that Jessica Drew, with her dark history of Hydra brainwashing and betrayal, is a far more complex and independent character than Peter Parker’s Spider-Man (Pagnoni Berns 224). Parker is a fun and enjoyable character, yes, with his boyish quips and bravado; and he certainly is independent, as he lacks a father figure and typically fights crime alone. Perhaps with the exception of a few team-ups with characters such as the incessantly flirtatious Black Cat, Parker could be one of the most independent heroes in the Marvel Universe—but when all is said and done, he lacks the depth and lack of ties as Drew (Kramer
Unlike Spider-Man, Spider-Woman’s actions are not so morally clear; that is, they are neither apparently right nor wrong (Pagnoni Berns 224). She is instead a gray character, similar to complicated male heroes such as Batman and Daredevil. Equally similar to these two male heroes, Drew has a dark past—she was once manipulated into serving the villainous Hydra organization—which both fuels her desire to fight evil while also making her uncertain and conflicted (Bendis). In Alias, for example, Spider-Woman is reluctant to use her powers because she fears she might use them to once more serve villains, just as Batman is does not kill out of a desire to prevent others from experiencing the same grief he felt after his parents’ brutal murder (Bendis). Likewise, she also shares the Caped Crusader’s penchant for solitude—but unlike Batman, her desire to be alone is not entirely chosen. Batman opts for solitude to protect his loved ones and because he has simply grown accustomed to it throughout his lonely, isolated childhood. Spider-Woman, on the other hand, withdraws from others because of a pheromone she emits, which causes women to hate her and men to feel both mistrustful of and sexually attracted to her (Pagnoni 224). As one can imagine, this makes for a rather lonely existence for Spider-Woman, and to bear this loneliness she needs incredible emotional strength. That strength perhaps surpasses that of Spider-Man, who, though he has his adversaries, is a generally well-liked person. It takes little effort to maintain a sense of identity and self-esteem when one is popular, after all; it takes enormous strength to maintain these same qualities when every person one meets reacts negatively toward one’s presence.

In 2014, a similar phenomenon occurs when Thor Odinson is rendered unworthy to wield his hammer, mjlonir, stripping him of his both his power and his title (Aaron). He simply becomes, in fact, Odinson, completely losing all of the status, duties, and purpose associate with the name of Thor (Aaron). Simply because the title has left him, however, does not mean that the
title will never be adopted by another. Neither does mjolnir’s abandonment on the blue side of
the moon mean that it will never again be wielded (Aaron). Quite the opposite is true. Although
she is undergoing chemotherapy treatments, Jane Foster, a staple Thor love interest, attempts to
lift the notoriously un-liftable hammer—and to her surprise, the hammer not only allows her to
lift it but grants her with both the powers and title of Thor (Aaron). Certainly, she still remains
feminine after this; as Thor, Foster becomes a Scandinavian beauty with flowing blond hair and
an athletic build (Aaron). She is not, however, Lady Thor. That is, she is not simply a female
copy of a hero—as Spider-Woman is—nor does she adopt the name of male Avenger as an
homage to his legacy—as the Carol Danvers Captain Marvel does. Rather, Thor is precisely what
her name implies: Thor. She possesses not a shadow or resemblance of Thor’s powers, like
Captain Marvel and Spider-Woman do in relation to their male predecessors, but Thor’s powers
in their entirety. She is not merely a mortal woman wielding the weapon and abilities of a god;
she is herself a deity, the Goddess of Thunder (Aaron). Foster is as much the Norse hero as Miles
Morales is now Spider-Man, or Kamala Khan is now Ms. Marvel, not a “pretender” that
dissatisfies fans (Bendis). For example, Foster is to Thor what Doctor Strange became to the
Sorcerer Supreme after the Ancient One’s demise—not what the much-hated Jason Todd was to
the role of Robin after Dick Grayson’s departure (Lee; Starlin). The latter is a character who tries
to fit a role; the former are characters who actually are their role. More importantly, the second
is annoying to fans, while the first seems real and authentic, and therefore easier to accept. An
actor who plays a decorate veteran may receive some adulation, but he will not receive more
than the man who actually is a veteran.

In Willow Wilson’s revival of Ms. Marvel, another title transfer is once more
performed—but this time, the title does not transfer from a male to a female. When Pakistani-
American teenager Kamala Khan suddenly receives polymorphic (i.e. stretching, shrinking, and shape-shifting) powers after exposure to terrigen mists, the title of Ms. Marvel moves to her—from female to female (Wilson). This has, of course, occurred before in Marvel comics; there have been several Spider-Women, enough to warrant an attachment of the woman’s name (Jessica Drew, etc.) to clarify which Spider-Woman is being referenced (Miczo 224). There has even been another Ms. Marvel, albeit one who functions as one of Norman Osborn’s post-Civil War Dark Avengers (Bendis). None of these previous female-to-female title shifts, however, have been as significant or meaningful as Kamala Khan’s adoption of Ms. Marvel. Firstly, Khan’s Ms. Marvel finally allows a girl to function in a similar fashion as the younger Peter Parker and later Miles Morales Spider-Man (Bendis). That is, Khan is allowed to be a fun-loving, quip-making teenager who is not objectified (just like Spider-Man), while other teenaged female characters, such as Cloak and Dagger’s Cloak and DC’s Starfire, are less fun and are made into sexual objects (Madrid 277). In fact, Khan wears a modest “burkini” and leggings while both Cloak and Starfire sport revealing costumes (Wilson). Secondly, the very nature of Khan’s power reception denotes her worth and value, as well her strength as a female character. Used by the reclusive Inhumans, the terrigen mists that give Khan her powers only draw out potential that already exists within a person; for example, terrigen mists activate a child’s genetic potential to become grow wings (Wilson). This indicates that Khan, unlike the hundreds or perhaps thousands of New Jersey residents who are also exposed to the terrigen mists, has an inner potential for strength and power (Wilson). Moreover, she carries the potential to be a hero, implying that any girl—regardless of her body-type, ethnicity, or popularity—can be one as well. Kamala Khan, after all, does not have an idealized body (she is average in height and weight), is
Pakistani, and is typically excluded or even bullied by other girls—so why would a girl with similar characteristics not be able to become a hero like her?

The statement that any girl—or woman—can be just as capable of being a hero as a man becomes more pronounced with the publication of *A-Force*, a tie-in with the Marvel comics series reboot *Secret Wars*. This is because unlike the main Avengers teams, or even spin-off teams like the New Avengers or Young Avengers, the A-Force Avengers do not merely feature a “token” female character. For example, A-Force does not simply have two women amongst a sea of eight men, implying that femaleness is somehow other or abnormal (Hurley 94). A-Force, instead, is composed entirely of female Avengers—a first for Marvel, whose previous teams were typically four-fifths male. Some fans, of course, have criticized the team, claiming that it is sexist against men. This would certainly be true if the members of A-Force demeaned men or if the series somehow suggested that men were somehow less capable of heroism than women.

However, one must note that (1) Marvel has feature all-male teams before, such the enigmatic Illuminati, without much censure from fans. Additionally, A-Force by no means implies that men are somehow inferior to women, although the team’s homeworld of Arcadia is a matriarchal society. If anything, A-Force demonstrates that (1) women can responsibly handle power, (2) women are resourceful enough to survive the apocalyptic events that destroyed most of the male heroes of Arcadia, (3) women are equally capable of being heroes, and (4) it is absurd for one gender to wield more power than the other. For example, She-Hulk responsibly leads her world of post-apocalyptic survivors, and the women of Arcadia were able to survive reality-fracturing events of *Secret Wars* because of their strength and ingenuity. Likewise, the all-female roster of A-Force asserts that women are capable of the heroism of predominately male or all-male teams such the Uncanny X-Men or Illuminati, while having all power in Arcadia rest in female hands.
allows the reader to recognize how ridiculous it is for American society to function predominately under male rule. Even the critics of A-Force, who are mostly male, recognize a shard of this truth when they rightly claim that having a matriarchal society or all-female team is unfair to the other gender.

Not all male fans, of course, have been critical of efforts to empower the female Avengers. Comic Book Resources’s (CBR) Greg McElhatton gives pro-female Avengers comics such as A-Force high ratings, granting A-Force in particular four-and-a-half stars out of five (McElhatton). Comic Vine’s Eric Guerrero gave the series a similar score (four out of five stars) while the Nerdist’s Eric Diaz gave the series a lower score but praised its message, stating that A-Force makes a “decidedly feminist statement by taking nearly all of their major female heroes and putting them together in their own Avengers title” (Guerrero; Diaz). However, the ire of the more reactionary male fans is enough to discourage the empowerment of women Avengers in not only A-Force, but in other series as well. A-Force proved unpopular with the primarily male fan-base, with its sale dropping to seventy-nine percent in October 2016; this lead to the title being prematurely cancelled (Arrant). In the same month, Chelsea Cain, the writer of female Avenger Mockingbird’s first solo series, was bullied off of Twitter by male fans aggravated by the series’ decidedly feminist themes (Clark). When Carol Danvers’s bathing-suit costume was switched for a more modest flight suit in 2012, male fans complained that the decision made them “want to vomit” (Miczo 175). Only some of the complaints leveled against female Avengers comics have been viable, such as those against James Robinson’s subtly misandrist Scarlet Witch (2015) series (The series constantly features the sorceress insulting men or wishing to be rid of them, actions that would be considered misogynistic if they were instead performed against women, and which demonstrate a message of female dominance rather than equality) (Parkin) However,
it typically seems that while the female Avengers are finally breaking loose of the unfairness plaguing their portrayal since the 1960s, their readers are now more than willing to treat them with equal or even greater inequality. To use a cliché, the female Avengers have taken a step forward regarding how they are depicted on the pages of comic books, from the way they are drawn to how they are written, but have taken two steps back as far as their acceptance by a predominately male readership goes.

It would be short-sighted and naïve, however, to assume that the lack of male acceptance indicates how little comic book women have changed. On the contrary, men’s stubborn refusal to accept strong female Avengers demonstrates that they have evolved. The portrayals of these superheroines are not perfect, certainly; the rendering of the female Iron Man Riri Williams is troubling, as her sexualized depictions are considered to be inappropriate given she is only fifteen. However, they have come a long way from the fainting, damsel in distress women who graced the Avengers pages in the 60s and 70s—and with a few exceptions, they are working to overcome the hypersexualization begun in the 80s. What is the result of this? Reactionary, sexist male readers feel threatened by the new brand of female Avengers, since they both threaten to enter men’s space (i.e. the realm of costumed heroics) and to become too difficult to control. It is easier for a male reader to feel as though he has dominance over a heroine who needs constant rescuing or who simply caters to his sexual appetite; it is much more difficult to contain the heroine who can fend for herself in a modest, practical costume. These women, in the eyes of reactionary readership, are dangerous. They are not tiny, distant, and underpowered as the Wasp is in Avengers #1, nor are they as sexualized and objectified as Black Widow and She-Hulk are throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s. Clad in practical, yet aesthetically-pleasing costumes that call to mind images of Greek goddesses, the new brand of female Avenger is strong and yet
somehow divinely beautiful, unimaginably powerful and yet in utter control of that power. They use sorcery to manipulate reality; they can take on an army of Ulron’s drones with their super-strength; they can fly. More importantly, the female Avengers have grown far beyond the narrow and limited expectations plaguing them in their early years, proving they are, in the words of Captain Marvel’s mother, “[punching] holes in the sky” (qtd. in Miczo 171)
Works Cited


