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# **Bulk, Breast, and Beauty: Negotiating the Superhero Body in Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses how the choice of actress Gal Gadot to play Wonder Woman negotiates between comic book fans' expectations and society's gender schema. It has taken 75 years for the industry to produce a movie adaptation of Wonder Woman, perhaps due to the 'problem' of female muscles. This article focuses on the significance of Wonder Woman's muscles using theoretical frames from sports sociology. One frame is *edgework*, coined by sociologist Stephen Lyng about dangerous activities that amateurs perform. The second frame is the feminist analysis of women's muscles. Women navigate the boundary between what sociologist Shari Dworkin calls 'emphasized femininity' and what is beyond this femininity. The article introduces Wonder Woman's origin, then presents theory of edgework and female muscles, third, it analyzes Wonder Woman as bodywork and edgework, and, finally, discusses Gadot's Wonder Woman body as feminist physique.

**Keywords:** *Wonder Woman*, Gal Gadot, female superhero, muscles, gender, edgework

Obvious, guys, we don't want her to be huge, we don't want her to be American Gladiator, why the hell would you want that? Yes, I know, boobs, *Jezus guys*, let's get your head out of the gutter. Perverts! It's okay, I like boobies too.

TheFilmJunkee, April 1, 2014

This article discusses how the choice of actress Gal Gadot to play Wonder Woman negotiates between, on the one hand, comic books' fantasy bodies and real ones, and how society's gender schema applies to both. To put it in a nutshell: What can the body of Wonder Woman, adapted for live action blockbuster film in 2016, tell us about contemporary popular perceptions of female embodiment, power, and strength?

The idea for this article took seed when I saw posters at my local cinema of Wonder Woman alongside posters with Batman and Superman, advertising *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016). I was struck by the image of a battle-ready and athletic woman with a frown on her face and sword in her hand. It was a different Wonder Woman from the one I remembered from comics and also unlike innocent-and-cheerful-looking actress Lynda Carter who played Wonder Woman in ABC's television show *Wonder Woman* (1975-79). This superhero, embodied by 30-year old Gal Gadot, signaled not only 'superheroism' but also 'woman.' Gadot's body on promotional material, which included posters, banners, and cardboard figures, made the superhero body look like an attainable and 'real' physique. Wonder Woman was lean, strong, and didn't perform fantastic stunts like flying, but was standing, walking, running. My perception that Wonder Woman was embodied differently here than in the past was supported by the aesthetic of the images, such as a grey-brownish color tone making her original red, yellow and blue costume less comic-book like.

I soon discovered her body was read very differently by comic book fans, who complained Gadot lacked body volume and breast size. 'Gal Gadot need more meat on that skeleton frame,' wrote fan baal blade, and another fan, Kain91939, judged Gadot to be 'a no talent matchstick that looks like she has bulimia' (TheFilmJunkee 2014). While there is variation in Wonder Woman's appearance over the decades, an

emphasis on breasts suggests the enduring relevance of Stan Lee's description of comic book femininity from 1978 in *How to Draw the Marvel Way*: 'a woman is drawn to look smooth and soft as opposed to the muscular, angular rendition of a man' (Lee and Buscema 1984, 44). Gadot, who besides being a model and Miss Israel has also been an army combat instructor, replied she represented a new world where breasts were cheap but fitness requires work. Drawing a connection between the Amazonian lineage of her character and the work required to embody her, Gadot emphasized her claim to the role would be hard-earned muscles and physical ability. 'It's the physical preparations that I'm starting now. A very serious training regime – Kung Fu, kickboxing, swords, jujutsu, Brazilian ... 1,000 and 1 things ... I'll gain body mass,' she promised (Outlaw 2013). This embodiment of the superhero stirred conflict in the contested terrain of muscles, aesthetics, and gender. What Gadot's comments made clear is that the challenge is not how to *play* Wonder Woman but how to *embody* her. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman are the most iconic American superheroes, created respectively in 1938, 1939, and 1941. And while the male heroes have been adapted into television and film repeatedly, the Wonder Woman in today's cycle of superhero movies is her first cinema adaptation. Superman's first live action screen appearance was in two serials for Columbia Pictures, *Superman* (1948) and *Atom Man vs Superman* (1950). In contrast, it was 33 years before a live action adaptation of Wonder Woman appeared on television, then another 39 years before Gadot was in *Wonder Woman*. These differences highlight the challenge of embodying a superhero fantasy in the body of a real woman as opposed to a man, a challenge I argue has to do with muscles. Gadot's Wonder Woman first appears in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, has her own feature with Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017), returns in Zack Snyder's *Justice League* accompanied by heroes Batman, Superman, Aquaman, Cyborg, and The Flash

(2017). Gadot will also appear in the planned *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) and *Justice League Part Two* (no year or director yet).

A guess as to why a movie adaptation took 75 years might be the ‘problem’ of female muscles. This article focuses on Wonder Woman’s muscles and uses theoretical frames from sports sociology; one concerned with muscles as affordance and action, the other with muscles as gendered physique. The first is *edgework*, a term coined by sociologist Stephen Lyng about dangerous activities amateurs perform, for example mountain climbing or sky diving. To ‘work’ the edge means ‘negotiating the boundary between chaos and order’ (1990, 855). This boundary is mental (navigating danger) and physical (doing climbing, sky diving). The second frame is the analysis of women’s muscles. Women navigate a socially constructed boundary between what sociologist Shari Dworkin calls accepted and ‘emphasized femininity’ and what is outside such femininity (2001, 335). The article has four parts: I first introduce Wonder Woman’s origin and core features, one of which is a muscular body; I then introduce edgework and muscles on real women; third, I analyze Gadot’s Wonder Woman as bodywork and edgework; and, fourth, I ask in what way Gadot’s Wonder Woman body can be seen as a feminist physique.

### **Wonder Woman: origin and four features**

Wonder Woman was created by American psychologist William Moulton Marston in 1941. The publisher DC had introduced Superman in June 1938 and Batman in May 1939. In an article called ‘Don’t Laugh at the Comics’ (1940) Marston defended the new superheroes and congratulated editor Max Gaines ‘for having seen the great potential of this whole generation of heroes’ (Kanigher et. al. 2016, location 8). In return, Gaines invited Marston to create his own comic book hero, and Marston came up with Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman had four traits: strength (she is Amazon and given life by Greek goddess Athena), love (she loves mankind), feminism (she supports women's rights), and a thinly veiled bondage theme (with chains and ropes frequently used by and on Wonder Woman). Marston took inspiration from his support of feminist politics, his private fondness of bondage and own alternative lifestyle, and used Greek mythology as narrative soil. Wonder Woman is molded from clay by her mother, Amazon Queen Hippolyte, and given life by Athena. The origin story, published in *All-Star Comics #8/Sensation Comics #1*, 1941, describes her as, 'With a hundred times the agility and strength of our best male athletes and strongest wrestlers, she appears as though from nowhere to avenge an injustice or right a wrong! As lovely as Aphrodite – as wise as Athena – with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules – she is known only as Wonder Woman . . .' (Kanigher et. al. 2016, location 10). When Captain Steve Trevor crashes on the Amazons' uncharted island, Paradise Island, the Queen holds a competition to select the best warrior to take him back to America: 'I shall find the strongest and wisest of the amazons. She shall go forth to fight for liberty and freedom and all womankind' (location 17). Diana wins and the Queen gives her the iconic costume in the colors of the Star-Spangled Banner: A red top with a golden eagle, a blue skirt with white stars, and red, high-heeled boots with white linings. Diana also wears indestructible metal bracelets that reflect bullets, a tiara with a red stone she can use as a projectile, a Magic Girdle that prevents men from having power over an Amazon, and (with #6, 1942), a magic Lasso of Truth, which compels anyone it captures to tell the truth. In #7, 1942, the skirt was changed to shorts. In the seventies her costume became swimsuit-size and in the nineties increasingly high-cut and eroticized. Like Superman, Princess Diana had a cover identity, Diana Prince, working as Steve Trevor's secretary.

Marston picked artist H. G. Peter to draw Wonder Woman. Diana initially had the frame of an Amazon, muscular, tall, with dark eyes and shoulder-length dark hair. This muscularity would vary over time. As drawn by Peter between 1941 and 1958, she was athletic with a wrestler's muscles. In the late fifties and sixties, she became a sexualized pin-up body, for example as drawn by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito. Not until the eighties did an athletic body return, now with well-defined fitness' muscles, for example as drawn by Gene Colan and Romeo Tanghal in 1982 or by George Perez in the eighties. In the nineties, she has a bodybuilder frame whose muscles alternate from small to large and are occasionally extremely large. In the nineties, Adam Hughes drew covers with a beautiful and very muscular Wonder Woman whose bodybuilder muscles remain in today's comic book interpretations. 'She got a lot of muscle here in Secret Six 14, 2009. Great muscle size and tone here!!' fan GWHH writes on comic.vine in 2014, where Superguy1591 replies, 'Bigger than Gal Gadot, the twig' ('How Muscular' 2014).

Tim Hanley describes in *Wonder Woman Unbound* (2014) how feminism and bondage were part of Wonder Woman's birth. Since Marston was a student, he had supported women's rights, and his wife, psychologist Elizabeth Holloway, collaborated with him on psychological experiments, writings, and in the creation of Wonder Woman. Reportedly, she suggested the superhero character be a woman, and Marston modeled Wonder Woman in part on Holloway, in part on his mistress, Olive Byrne, daughter of feminist Ethel Byrne. Byrne's heavy bracelets inspired Wonder Woman's bracelets. Marston's research had convinced him women were better able to control emotions than men and he secretly lived in polygamy with Holloway and Byrne and had two children with each of them. They had a sexual life with bondage, as Marston believed in submission through love and sex. Marston thought, 'only when the control of self by others is more pleasant than the unbound assertion of self

in human relationships can we hope for a stable, peaceful human society . . .’ (Hanley 2014, location 256). Marston wrote all the stories until his death in 1947, and pictures of characters being chained or tied up were so frequent that an advisory board wanted changes, which Marston refused.

Summing up, Wonder Woman began as superior to men in sports and war, a dominatrix and feminist, and a ‘wise and loving woman’ who tamed men’s ‘strong aggressive natures’ with her lasso of truth (‘Wonder Woman for President,’ 1943).

### **Wonder Woman: edgework and female muscles**

Strength, love, feminism, and bondage persist in the metatext of Wonder Woman across media and time. These qualities, which are central to her appeal as a female superhero and inflect any reading of her muscular body, can be usefully framed as ‘edgework’, both in reference to her physical heroism and her potential to challenge social norms and boundaries. Sociologist Stephen Lyng (1990) coined ‘edgework’ for dangerous sports activities such as sky diving and mountain climbing, which participants do without participating in contests or being paid. Why risk their lives? Because, participants explained, it made them feel their ‘self’ and acutely alive. In Lyng’s definition, edgework requires the subject learn a skill (a sky diver must pack her parachute, estimate wind and height, and so on). Edgework puts your life at stake. The ‘edge’ is a boundary ‘between chaos and order’ (1990, 855) and learning to navigate the edge requires mastery of one’s actions, reactions, emotions, and interactions with others and the environment. Edgework is a physical and intrapsychological experience. ‘The ‘edge,’ or boundary line, confronted by the edgeworker can be defined in many different ways: life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment’ (857). Edgework



strengthens one's self by training self-control. Says Lyng, '[i]n edgework, the ego is called forth in a dramatic way' and players feel 'self-realization,' 'self-actualization,' and 'a purified and magnified sense of self' (860).

Psychologist Michael J. Apter in *Danger* (2007) extends edgework to include activities that challenge social laws and norms, like fast driving, committing crimes for fun, and taboo sex. He adds the notion of moving between zones; a safety zone, a danger zone, and a trauma zone (28). In the safety zone one is safe, in the trauma zone one risks getting hurt (the mountain climber risks falling, taboo sexuality can have costs) and in the danger zone one tries to get as close to the edge, to trauma, as possible without falling off the edge. Edgework activities, Apter explains, make subjects feel *excitement* and *anxiety* depending on appraisal of the situation. If you think you can manage a situation, you will feel excitement, if not, excitement turns to anxiety. The more intense the excitement, the higher levels of stress hormones like adrenaline, cortisol, and neorepinephrine. 'In other words, one buys excitement with fear, and the greater the cost, the better the product,' says Apter (43).

Wonder Woman is discussed, here, as one embodiment of edgework. Specifically, in 1941, to foreground issues such as bondage and women's rights in the figure of a female superhero can be seen as edgework in the sense that these were not 'safe zone' issues. From the point of view of her creator, Marston, the agenda was to alter the reigning perception of women as weak. As Marston explained, 'not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power' (Lepore 2015, 187). After his death in 1947, allusions to bondage and women's rights were toned down. The connection to bondage and polygamy as practiced by Marston remained a secret. After his death, Holloway and Byrne lived the rest of their lives together without telling their four children, they had the same father. Bondage was part of Wonder Woman's origin, although as a taboo topic it was ambiguously voiced

and played with in the comic book stories. Cover artist Adam Hughes, who drew Wonder Woman covers from the nineties, shifted between portraying Diana as being dominant and as being dominated. Hughes quit DC when his cover for *Wonder Woman* #196 (November 2003) was deemed 'inappropriate' and censored (Johnston 2016). In Hughes' version, a Wonder Woman in a swimsuit-size costume and with bodybuilder-size muscles is surrounded by male journalists, one pulling on her lasso and another touching her thigh. In the censored version, only Diana's face remains from Hughes' drawing, she is dressed from head to toe, and no one touches her. Nevertheless, in the comic books, bondage stayed a recurring part of a Wonder Woman erotic subtext. Thus, in *Wonder Woman: Earth One* Vol. 1 (2016), Diana proudly submits to chains in the name of love and justice: 'I understand. This was *my decision*' (Hughes' covers are at <https://thanley.wordpress.com/tag/yanick-paquette/>).

Where bondage can be seen as edgework, so, too, can musculature development of the female body. Sociologist Shari L. Dworkin in 'Holding Back': Negotiating a Glass Ceiling on Women's Muscular Strength' (2001) analyses how women at fitness centers negotiate gender norms for strength and beauty. Both men and women use a gender schema, which is socially constructed in accordance with a society's norms (by 'schema' I include *schema*, *stereotype*, and *script*). However, women's gender schema is defined in relation to men's and thus in relation to hegemonic and dominant masculinity. Thus, where men's weight lifting at a gym fits the 'dominant conceptions of masculinity as well as heterosexuality,' for women the same activities 'tended to bring their femininity and heterosexuality into question' (335). Likewise, when men develop muscles, this is *in accordance* with a gender schema which equates masculinity with strength and muscle, but when women train their bodies and grow muscle, this is *in conflict* with a gender schema which equates femininity with weakness and beauty. The recent emergence in the eighties of women

in fitness and in the nineties and the new millennium in extreme sports like sky diving, mountain climbing, and long-distance running, is carefully scrutinized, debated, negotiated, and regulated. For instance, women were not allowed to run marathons in the Olympic Games until 1980, and George Butler's documentary *Pumping Iron II: The Women* (1985) shows judges discussing rules for femininity and muscle size at a female bodybuilding contest in 1983. Dworkin concludes, 'the increasing size of the female bodybuilder is only acceptable once 'tamed' by beauty' (335). Where men display muscles at bodybuilding contests, women also dye their hair, use make-up and wear nail polish, and often have facial plastic surgery to better balance 'masculine' muscle mass with 'emphasized femininity.'

In *Built to Win* Dworkin and sociologist Leslie Heywood ask, 'does the female athlete work as a progressive new ideal for women, an image a woman can aspire to without feeling like . . . she is blindly following a cultural script that demeans her? The answer . . . is quite complicated' (2003, xxix). Bodies are cultural constructs and female athletes push the gender schema. Or, as Dworkin puts it, they push a glass ceiling on the size of women's muscles. Once, sports and muscles were exclusively male terrain. When we look at male superheroes, their bodies are relatively stable. Costumes may change, but muscularity doesn't for Superman, Batman, Captain America, or the Hulk. By contrast, looking at Wonder Woman's body since 1941, bulk size varies, adhering to a changing view of women, muscle, and fitness that puts her at the edge of accepted gender. The rise of the fitness center in the eighties can be linked to the appearance of a more toned Wonder Woman, and women's increased presence in bodybuilding in the nineties led to Wonder Woman's larger bulk and more extreme muscularity. 'This is extreme even for you, isn't it?' Wonder Woman slyly smiles in a drawing by ChrisCross' in 1996. 'Ah fuck stop that! Stop that right

now! Kill it with fire! Kill it with fire!’ a fan reviewer, writing in 2016, commented (see drawing at website, ‘JLA #90 Review’ 2016).

Tellingly, Dworkin and Heywood call the female athlete a ‘mongrel’ composed of disparate elements. Like a sphinx, she is both monster and imagined fantasy creature (49). Wonder Woman can similarly be seen as a creature shaped by edgework from her birth, an Amazon princess pushed from a safe zone of feminine strength into a danger zone, where the new female superhero challenges gender norms. The trauma zone is where Wonder Woman is ‘killed,’ her storyline cut short, her body censored or redesigned. Her changing flesh recurrently pushes at the boundaries of our gender schema and muscles are scrutinized by comic book readers, eager to judge if Wonder Woman be desirable or undesirable, appropriate or ‘inappropriate.’

### **Wonder Woman: bodywork as edgework**

After the casting of Gadot was made public in December, 2013, comparison between the comic book character and actress began. ‘She has no ass, has no muscles, and probably weighs 50 less lbs than wonderwoman, and has no breasts at all. She physically resembles wonderwoman in no way. Horrible casting choice and no matter how she acts it will not matter as casting her for the role is an insult in the same way casting a 130 lb nerd as superman would be an insult to superman fans’ (yoyepo91, TheFilmJunkee 2014).

Let us pause for a moment and look at Gadot’s physique. 30 years old in *Batman v Superman* and 31 in *Wonder Woman*. In *Wonder Woman 1984*, Gadot will be a decade older than Lynda Carter, who was mid-twenties when she played Diana Prince for ABC. Carter was 1.77m tall, won Miss World USA in 1972 and finished as a Miss World semifinalist in 1972. Gadot, 1.78m tall, also won a beauty pageant, and

was Miss Israel in 2004. But after that, her career differed from Carter's. Gadot served two years in the Israeli military as a combat instructor, and while she later modeled for brands like Castro and Miss Sixty, Gucci and Jaguar, she also studied law. Her movie debut as actress was playing tough girl and villainess seductress Gisele in *Fast & Furious* (Justin Lin, 2009), *Fast Five* (Justin Lin, 2011), and *Fast & Furious 6* (Justin Lin, 2013). She had auditioned to be a Bond girl, which she didn't get. But the casting director three months later cast her as Gisele: 'I think the main reason was that the director Justin Lin really liked that I was in the military, and he wanted to use my knowledge of weapons,' said Gadot (Nora 2017).

As Gisele, Gadot reportedly performed most of her own stunts, also drove a motorcycle, her black 2006 Ducati Monster-S2R. So, while not hugely muscular, she had a body shaped by military service, weapons, combat, and motorcycles. Yet this did not convince comic book fans. 'If she turned sideways she's going to disappear [sic] on film. Gina Carano is a way better ww,' a fan suggested ('Gal Gadot' *Entertainment Tonight* 2016). Carano, a Mixed Martial Arts fighter, starred in Steven Soderbergh's *Haywire* (2011) which he wrote for Carano, impressed with her MMA fighting skills. Carano had a more heavy and muscular build than Gadot and performed her own fight scenes in *Haywire*. In contrast, comic book fans found Gadot 'skinny,' 'anorexic,' a 'stick' and a 'bitch.' Next to Carano, another actress fans mention as a point of physical comparison to Gadot is statuesque Lucy Lawless, who plays Xena in *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndicated, 1995–2001) (and Gadot's brown-color-toned costume clearly resembles Xena's costume).

To the question of muscles, Gadot countered she would start training and her fitness schedule would be scrupulously reported by online and written media and followed by comic book fans (for example 'How to Get Ripped Like Gal Gadot in 'Wonder Woman',' Barna 2017). Shortly after her announcement as Wonder Woman,

an interview by Kofi Outlaw in 2013 says: ‘She was once enlisted in the Israeli Defense Force, where she served as an athletic trainer. Not only does that make her equipped to handle a strenuous training regiment, and adapt at learning different deadly combat techniques, it also means she has knowledge in experience with the specific types of training that result in things like body mass vs. lean muscle’ (Outlaw 2013).

Fans protest Gadot lacks bulk and that her breasts are too small. To bust size, Gadot responded: ‘Hmm. I represent the Wonder Woman of the new world. Breasts ... anyone can buy for 9,000 shekels and everything is fine. By the way, Wonder Woman is amazonian, and historically accurate amazonian women actually had only one breast. So, if I’d really go ‘by the book’ ... it’d be problematic’ (Outlaw 2013). She repeatedly addressed breast size, for example asking the host on the Jimmy Kimmel show what he thought of her breasts (‘Gal Gadot Asks Jimmy Kimmel’ 2016). However, although fans found her breasts small, the biggest problem was lack of bulk. ‘No, it’s not breasts. Amazons are supposed to be just a little beefier’ (fan prof shad1, ‘Gal Gadot’ 2016, *Entertainment Tonight*).

The discussion of ‘lean muscle’ recalls the women Dworkin interviewed in her study. Dworkin divided women into non-lifters (25 percent of the women), light to moderate lifters (65 percent), and heavy lifters (10 percent) (337). Dworkin discusses how the two first groups, which make 90 percent, navigated a glass ceiling on embraced femininity. The glass ceiling metaphor is from the invisible barring of women from boards and leadership positions in business, and Dworkin applies the metaphor to body culture. As mentioned, society’s gender schema sees strength and muscles as masculine and prefer women’s bodies slim with invisible muscles. Both non and moderate lifters juggle the gender schema in regard to size. To non-lifters, ‘it appears to be *size* – muscle or fat – that is the powerfully feared transgression against

femininity' (338). Moderate lifters want muscles without going off-script and voiced 'unique tensions about desiring muscular strength while not wanting to increase body size from muscle mass' (340). As a lifter explained, 'I like strength, and I like maintaining my physical structure with muscles, but I don't like the look of being too buff . . . I like lean, fit, a little buff, feminine. I don't wanna look like Cory Everson' (342). Non-lifters want a slender frame, and moderate lifters 'toned, firm, curvy, and muscled (but not too much)' (341).

Moderate lifters carefully negotiated this upper limit, watched their bodies for signs of 'excess' musculature, and consciously adjusted or stopped their weight workouts accordingly. So as to mediate an expressed fear of bulk with a simultaneous desire to seek strength, several distinct strategies were used that pushed upward on a glass ceiling on strength yet bumped up against it and then 'held back.' (341)

Using metaphors from edgework, we see how non-lifters and moderate lifters enter a danger zone located between the safe zone of the conventional slender female body and the trauma zone with a body deemed unfeminine and undesirable, whether fat or too muscular. An article about Gadot's training puts her in the danger zone: 'When she did step into a gym, Twight and Bradley [Gadot's personal trainers] didn't want to Hulk her out, but rather keep her looking lean, mean, and most of all, believable. That called for high interval weight training, and plenty, plenty of cardio' (Barna 2017). To be in the danger zone is not easy. Gadot has personal trainers and is, as said, scrupulously followed by a media that publishes pictures of her body so the audience can judge her physique: Too fat or too skinny, too muscular or not muscular enough?

Barna 2017 has pictures of Gadot in the gym, at the beach, doing training, on the film set, and in *Batman v Superman* and *Wonder Woman*.

If society's gender schema links muscles to masculinity, how, then, can we understand comic book fans' complaints about *lack* of bulk? Do fans want women to transgress emphasized femininity? Here, several discourses might be at work simultaneously. One discourse is an appreciation of Wonder Woman as sexualized fantasy woman with roots in her bondage origin. Fans write about such a fantasy: 'Gee, men liking large breasts, shocker. Wonder Woman is gorgeous, black haired, blue eyed, 6' tall with large breasts, wide hips and a tiny waist. You're not going to find any real life woman who looks like that. I wish they all did, but she's idealized to what I wanted at 14, not reality' ('Gal Gadot' *Entertainment Tonight* 2016). Another fan writes, 'I'M SORRY MS. GADOT.....even though you're very very beautiful.....LINDA did it to me first!!!!!! maybe it's because i was a pre teen with raging hormones or something . . . .but seeing Linda Carter jumping around in that outfit was a pretty powerful image for me and a lot of guys my age back then' (2016). Another discourse is when fans use an adaptation critique:

Seriously, it never even crossed my mind that she is not particularly busty.

What I DID complain about when Gal Gadot was cast as Wonder Woman was that she was way too skinny for the role. She looked like an emaciated super model, the sort that starve themselves to look skeletal. She was simply utterly unbelievable to me as being a kick ass warrior woman. Where I failed was to appreciate that she was a physical trainer in the Israeli army, and that she was more than capable of doing the physical work to beef up for the role. She did not let us down. (2016)



This fan was afraid Gadot could not ‘beef up’ but learns she was ‘physical trainer in the Israeli army’ and is satisfied with her performance in *Wonder Woman* – ‘she did not let us down.’ A third discourse are fans focusing on a woman warrior as a real possibility rather than as fantasy. ‘[A]ll the depictions of WW have been a bit on the curvy side, but is that only because most of these depictions are geared towards boys and men as an audience? Think about it, Diana is a centuries old warrior, not being a woman or having breasts, i wouldn't know, but i feel like given the mythology of WW and the universe it would be FAR more likely that a female warrior would be less kat dennings and more gal gadot . . . ultimately Gals body shape and build makes more sense for a warrior than say, Lucy Lawless’ (2016).

Among comments, few appear to be female fans, judging from their names: ‘[D]amn perverts, this woman is perfect role as Wonder Woman. she is amazing and hardcore. not everything has to be over sexualized,’ writes Serina Halliwell2, and Athenstar101 finds that, ‘I think not being busty helped the movie because at least this time the heroine’s flesh is not distracting the audience from watching the movie’ (2016).

Lean muscles compromise between being overly muscular (the comic book character) or too skinny (Gadot). The moderate lifters aim for lean muscles, which also characterize many female athletes and martial artists whose performances require agility, skill, movement, grace. Martial arts skills are among Gadot’s abilities. The muscles of the female athlete and martial artist are used for action rather than the display of a bodybuilder. ‘[Female athletes’] muscles, like the fashion models’ slenderness, are hard-earned, but here the means is not abstinence but exertion. Though their bodies have been meticulously cultivated, their bodies aren’t the point: the point is their ability to perform’ (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, xx).

### ***Gal Gadot: Physique and Feminism***

To return to my origin moment for this article – the posters of Gadot in my local cinema – what appealed was the image of a lean, strong, determined, and attractive woman whose physique looked *attainable*. She looked like someone I wanted to be and whose physique I might realize if I only submitted to a torturous training regime. But it did not look fantastic and impossible.

My perception of Wonder Woman as role model seems to be shared by more audiences. *Wonder Woman* earned more than \$821.74 million, making it the highest grossing superhero origin film of all times. By casting an actress whose strength originates from ‘ordinary’ experiences – as many comic book fans pointed out, Gadot’s military service is standard in Israel where two years of military service is mandatory for men and women. Also, driving a motorcycle, doing martial arts, and performing stunts was seen before, however, mostly with male actors. Together, these elements make actress Gadot a ‘tough’ yet ‘attainable’ role model. Although she plays a superhero character half Amazon, half divine, her training was documented and shared with audiences invited to duplicate her fitness work. This Wonder Woman is neither played by a model with a body attained through ‘abstinence’, nor by an athlete who might have smashed the glass ceiling and strayed into a trauma zone of masculinity. No, Gadot remained in the danger zone, pushing the glass ceiling. Now, this glass ceiling is not on size of women’s muscles (here, Gadot stays within emphasized femininity), rather, it is the glass ceiling on how to make a female superhero a believable protagonist in a mainstream cinema movie. This had been done over the years by male actors with male superheroes: Christopher Reeve and Henry Cavill play Superman, Michael Keaton, Christian Bale and Ben Affleck play Batman, and Robert Downey Jr. has made Iron Man one of the most popular superheroes. However, no actress had yet made a female superhero popular with mainstream

cinema audiences, and to do so required careful ‘working’ the ‘edge’ of and negotiating the aesthetics of a superhero fantasy body with real muscles.

To call such work edgework may seem farfetched since Gadot doesn’t risk death, like a mountain climber risks falling from a cliff. However, like Marston challenged gender when he created Diana in 1941, the casting of Gadot, too, challenges audience expectations, here to a comic book superhero. Navigating discourses of Wonder Woman as hypersexualized, as Amazonian warrior, and as having a bodybuilder frame, puts Gadot in a danger zone where she risks ‘death’ as Wonder Woman. If edgework failed, if Gadot went over the edge, Wonder Woman could be cancelled.

To ensure success for this real-life adaptation of Wonder Woman, two of the four elements – strength, love, feminism and bondage – were ‘tamed.’ Bondage was practically removed, with Wonder Woman’s Lasso of Truth used for comical relief rather than erotic dominance. Thus, Steve submits voluntarily to her lasso in *Wonder Woman* to prove his honesty, and Aquaman in *Justice League* accidentally rests on the lasso, spilling his loneliness and insecurity to his fellow superheroes to his own embarrassment. Feminism is also tamed in today’s cycle of superhero movies. Feminism was always controversial, risking estranging male comic book readers. In 1972, feminist magazine *Ms* put Wonder Woman on the cover of its first issue and quoted feminist Gloria Steinem, ‘Looking back now at these Wonder Woman stories from the ‘40s, I am amazed by the strength of their feminist message’ (Lepore 2015, location 12505). However, an attempt by DC to tie in Wonder Woman with feminism in six feminist-themed issues in 1972 was cancelled after the first issue (‘Special! Women’s Lib Issue’), and the series’ female editor, Roubicek Woolfolk, was fired. Woolfolk wanted to ‘decrease violence in the plots and return our heroine to the feminism of her birth’ (286). This didn’t happen. In the eighties Mindy Newell would

be the first woman to write Wonder Woman, however, her stories were not feminist, restricted by DC.

In Gadot's embodiment of Wonder Woman, feminism is interpreted as compassion, love, and the character's good heart and passion for peace for all mankind. In a panel at Comic Con 2016, Gadot said: 'So for me the most important thing was really to portray this character in a way that everyone can relate to, not only girls, not only boys, but men and women as well, because she has such a beautiful universal story' ('Wonder Woman 2016 Comic Con'). This 'universal story' is one of the individual's struggle for peace, not for Amazons (women) or Americans, but for all nations and all people. This portrayal of an unselfish hero ties in with Gadot's military service. 'You give two or three years and it's not about you. You give your freedom away. You learn discipline and respect,' she said ('Gal Gadot,' Glamour 2016). Addressing feminism, Gadot said: 'There are such misconceptions as to what a feminist is. Feminism is about equality. I want all people to have the same opportunities and to get the same salaries for the same jobs. I realize I'm doing what I want to do because of the women before me who laid out the groundwork. Without them I wouldn't be an educated working mother who is following her dreams' ('Gal Gadot,' Glamour 2016).

This version of feminism resembles postfeminism with a neoliberal focus on an individual's responsibility and agency rather than that of a group. Gadot also draws from her tough-girl character Gisele in the *Fast & Furious* franchise: 'I wanted to show that women are empowered and strong, and don't have to be saved by some male hero, but they can take care of themselves using their intelligence and their power . . . I prefer to portray the stronger, more independent, inspiring woman than the heartbroken, sad one. Because in real life, women do it all' (Glamour).

A question one might ask is what politics Wonder Woman represents. Marston had Diana fight for ‘liberty and freedom and all womankind.’ Today, the words ‘liberty,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘womankind’ are gone. Actress Lynda Carter, asked to comment on Gadot’s take on the role, said: ‘It’s not so much about her super powers as it is about her ethic. I always thought of her as a figure who stands for what’s right. We all know what’s wrong with the world today, so maybe we need her right now’ (Outlaw 2013). In Jenkins 2017 *Wonder Woman* film, Diana realizes evil is not an external force, but is in the heart of humans. ‘I used to want to save the world. To end war and bring peace to mankind; but then I glimpsed the darkness that lives within their light. I learnt that inside every one of them there will always be both. The choice each must make for themselves – something no hero will ever defeat.’ Ethics and politics, in line with neoliberal feminism, is an individual enterprise.

### **Conclusion: survival of the fittest**

Jane Gottesman’s *Game Face* from 2002 is subtitled *What Does a Female Athlete Look Like?* It has photos of various kinds of female athletes from wrestlers to runners. I, too, ask what a Wonder Woman today looks like? As embodied by Gadot, I see her as a site of feminist appeal. However, this is a conflicted appeal. As with the female athlete, Wonder Woman creates ‘tension between critique and appreciation, the idea that images can do negative and affirmative cultural work simultaneously . . .’ (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 11). Thus, an update by Gadot on her Facebook caused a stir for her being pro-IDF in the Gaza-Israel conflict (Selby 2014). Pleasure is, in political terms, rarely simple. In my case, I can relate to Gadot’s physical star persona and her embodiment of the comic book character. Gadot is married and a mother, does martial arts, is skilled in several sports, has served in the military, is a model and former Miss Israel, and negotiates an ideal of femininity I also struggle with. Her life

forms the same compromise as her muscles: The result of a strict regime, no longer invisible, but toned, lean, navigating the edge of breaking beyond emphasized femininity. The Gadot/Wonder Woman feminism is not radical in these terms, but operates the edge of gender, as does the superhero body of Wonder Woman. I see it as a type of feminism which elsewhere (2018) I have called evofeminism. Evo, because from an evolutionary point of view, what makes us fitter also serves our survival. After Wonder Woman's survival and success, female superheroes are waiting. *Captain Marvel*, with protagonist played by Brie Larson, is announced for 2019. And this is just the beginning.

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#### **Notes on contributor**

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