

## **Tights and Tiaras: Female Superheroes and Media Cultures**

***Deb Waterhouse-Watson and Evie Kendal***

*Superhero wanted. Caped and costumed applicants ONLY need apply...*

Until Wonder Woman leapt into comic book stores around the world in 1941, all comic book superheroes were expected to sport bulging biceps and other no less protruding male appendages snug within their spandex unitards. In 2010, the 600th issue of *Wonder Woman* celebrated the Amazonian superhero's longevity in print media. To mark the occasion, the issue reinvented the superhero's iconic costume to make it less revealing, introducing dark trousers and a blue, starred jacket. This shift to more practical, less sexualised wear arguably reflects changing attitudes about gender and the growing female presence in the comics industry. Nevertheless, the change prompted some controversy online amongst fan communities, again highlighting the problematic history of the representation of women as powerful figures.

Thus *Tights and Tiaras: Female Superheroes and Media Cultures* was born—an interdisciplinary, international conference dedicated to interrogating the representation of powerful female figures in media of all types, from comic books to online gaming and contemporary art, and from superhero staples like Wonder Woman, Buffy, and Xena to genetically modified kindergarteners and supercharged supermums. Taking place over

two days in August 2011, at Monash University's Clayton campus, the conference included a keynote by renowned young adult fiction author Karen Healey, who discussed the lack of female employees within leading comics companies such as Marvel and D.C. Comics. It also featured a panel of authors and artists in addition to academic papers.

The rise of the female superhero in all areas of popular culture is clearly an area that warrants investigation: the conference sparked strong public interest outside academic circles, gaining substantial media attention including articles in Melbourne broadsheet *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, as well as radio interviews with members of the organising committee.

This special section in *Colloquy* brings together nine articles based on papers presented at the conference that engage with different facets of female empowerment beyond the everyday. They ask: can superpowers be disempowering? How do texts negotiate issues such as over-sexualisation? Can the "princess" figure be empowering for girls? In what ways can normative sexualities be challenged or subverted? How can powerful mothers be represented? What kinds of feminism do these texts engage with? How do audiences—particularly fans—interact with female superhero characters? How is the medium significant to the portrayal of the "superheroine"? This special section therefore engages with the possibilities and limitations of female superhero texts spanning the 20th and 21st centuries.

The three articles that open the collection feature iconic female superhero staples: Wonder Woman, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Jean Grey/The Phoenix of the *X-Men* franchise. Ann Matsuuchi's paper, "Wonder Woman Wears Pants," explores the representation of Wonder Woman as a pro-choice feminist activist, defending reproductive rights for women from pro-life "villains." While initially conceived as a six-issue story arc, Matsuuchi blames the "tangled politics of the publishing world" for the cancellation of the series after a single issue in 1972. The significance of Wonder Woman as a superhero in her own right is also discussed in this paper, as well as her changing relationship with feminism over time. Another superheroine not created in the shadow of a male superhero is Joss Whedon's Buffy, and Emma Beddows' "Buffy the Transmedia Hero" engages with the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a transmedia phenomenon, spanning television, film and comics. Advancing a new theory of trans-semiotic flow, Beddows challenges the traditional valuing of transmedia storytelling for its ability to offer variety of expression, demonstrating that inconsistencies in tone, particularly in relation to character, can negate this potential. Beddows argues that an "adaptive

motif" is necessary to bridge gaps between the different media, and character is instrumental in providing this bridge. This bridging between media forms is also central to Lenise Prater's article, "Gender and Power: The Phoenix/Jean Grey across Time and Media," which explores how women in the *X-men* movie franchise are portrayed as unable to handle power. Based on comics from the 1960s and 70s, Prater argues that the more recent films disempower the female X-men, while trying to claim an "alibi" for this sexist representation in the earlier comics tradition. However, Prater notes that while the comics show both males and females struggling to control their superpowers, the films reserve this struggle for female characters, most notably including the character Jean Grey, whose alter ego, The Phoenix, is treated very differently in the films compared with the comics.

Articles by Deb Waterhouse-Watson and Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario examine how characters traditionally constructed as weak and submissive have been "reclaimed" as empowered female heroes. In "Re/de-constructing the Yellow Brick Road," Waterhouse-Watson argues that the recent Sci Fi Channel mini-series *Tin Man* (2007) critiques normative ideals of gender through its parodic intertextual relationship with the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. The series remakes Dorothy as a superhero whose heroism encompasses traditionally feminine and masculine qualities, celebrating the primacy of the bonds of sisterhood and thus undermining patriarchal ideologies. Taking Cinderella as its central focus, Do Rozario's "Comic Book Princesses for Grown-ups" interrogates the convergence of superhero and fairy tale princess in comics, including the *Fables* series by Bill Willingham. The paper further examines how early princesses were active, dynamic figures in contrast to the passive female heroes of Perrault, the Grimms and Disney that came to dominate popular perceptions of princesshood. Do Rozario argues that comics consequently negotiate and reinvent the tradition of the princess.

Into the realm of gender-bending Japanese comics and animation, Catherine Bailey's "Prince Charming by Day, Superheroine by Night?" explores the representation of diverse sexualities and understandings of gender in anime and manga series *Revolutionary Girl Utena* and *Sailor Moon*. Bailey argues that these series subvert heteronormative scripts, through positive portrayals of lesbian relationships and of characters whose gender presentation is fluid. Despite moments of anxiety in relation to gender-bending, queer characters, the texts thus dismantle the categories of "masculine" and "feminine." Jane Felstead's article, "Man-eaters and Fan-dancers," also looks at fluid representations of gender, this time through avatar-embodiment in video games. Noting the different ways

female characters and gamers are represented within the industry, Felstead focuses on “geek culture” and how it relates to the female form.

Finally, Evie Kendal explores superheroines at a very different stage of life from typical heroes. In her article, “There’s No One Perfect Girl,” Kendal looks at kindergarten-aged superheroes the “Powerpuff Girls,” who are “saving the world before bedtime.” Embracing the third-wave feminist ideals of “Girl Power” and diversity, *The Powerpuff Girls* contains three very different superhero personalities, each embodying a different ideal of female power.

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*The Sidhe Literary Collective 2011, Monash University*

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