

**Lepore, Jill.** *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. New York: Knopf, 2014. 408 pp. \$29.95.

As authorship studies progresses as a discipline, it is becoming increasingly evident that it should not limit itself to studies of single authors and their body of work. Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* has been described as a biography of both Wonder Woman and her creator William Moulton Marston. A biography of an author can be of interest to the field of authorship studies in its own right, but it is the categorization of the text as a biography of a fictional character that is most fascinating and of interest to authorship scholars. Although Lepore, a historian, does not purport to be an authorship—or even a literary—scholar, her historical examination of the creation of Wonder Woman holds potential for authorship scholars because it functions as an exploration of the multifaceted authorship behind a single character.

In keeping with the comics theme, Lepore provides a “Splash Page” in place of a traditional introduction. Here, Lepore asserts that Wonder Woman is “the missing link in a chain of events that begins with the woman suffrage campaigns of the 1910s and ends with the troubled place of feminism fully a century later” (xiii). Lepore divides her book into three parts and an epilogue. Authorship scholars will find the third section of the most interest, as Lepore discusses the tangible authorial influences on Wonder Woman's creation and early comics, but that does not mean they should skip the previous ones.

The first two sections of the book, “Veritas” and “Family Circle,” form a biographical sketch of Marston, his family, and the life influences that lead up to and influence the creation of Wonder Woman. Biography and influence are not novel ideas in authorship studies, even if Lepore's exploration is made more interesting by the remarkable nature of Marston's life and the influence of two women within it. The more novel take-away for authorship studies is the idea that these women are actually creators or authors themselves.

Readers learn that Marston's wife, Sadie Elizabeth Holloway, was an avid Sappho enthusiast (“Suffering Sappho!” would become one of Wonder Woman's curses), and attended a women's college that Lepore describes as a “hotbed of suffragism” (18). Holloway was strong and uncompromising. Then there was Olive Byrne, niece of Margaret Sanger (founder of Planned Parenthood), who moved in with the Marstons in 1926. It was Byrne's large, metal bracelets worn on both of her wrists that inspired those of Wonder Woman. She was also the mother of two of Marston's four children. If Holloway was the strength and independence of Wonder Woman, Lepore contends, Byrne was the maternal love. It is tempting to see Holloway and Byrne as mere influences, but their claim to authorship grows in the third and final section of Lepore's history.

Henty, Meta. “Review: Lepore, Jill. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Knopf, 2014)” *Authorship* 4.1 (2015). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21825/aj.v4i1.1109>

---

*Copyright Meta Henty. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.*

Although the first two sections intersperse the chronological, biographical life of Marston with later episodes from the Wonder Woman comics, it is not until the third section, "Paradise Island," that Wonder Woman actually appears in the main timeline. Byrne, writing in *Family Circle*, interviewed Marston in 1940 in the midst of heated arguments over a new type of reading for children: comic books. Marston's interview caught the attention of Charlie Gaines, publisher of *Superman*, who hired Marston as a consulting psychologist. Marston immediately proposed the idea of a female superhero. But was the idea really Marston's? Lepore claims it belonged to Holloway, citing Holloway's son, Pete (186). Lepore also suggests that "a female superhero might have been Olive Byrne's idea, though she'd have been the last person in the world to take credit for it" (187). Lepore's historical exploration raises several important questions for authorship scholars: How important is the original idea? Does the original idea constitute authorship? How might one give credit to a creator that does not claim credit for herself?

Beyond the question of the original creator, section three presents a whole host of people that could claim some authorial control over Wonder Woman. The readers are introduced to Gaines, the publisher, who is concerned not only with Wonder Woman's ability to sell, but also with not getting into trouble with the censors; Sheldon Mayer, the young editor assigned to Marston who dropped the "Suprema" from Wonder Woman's original name, "Suprema, the Wonder Woman;" and Harry G. Peter, the sixty-one year old former suffrage cartoonist Marston hired to draw Wonder Woman. Peter worked under the direction of Marston; the look had to be approved by Marston and Gaines, the script by Mayer, illustrating the collaborative process involved in the authorship of Wonder Woman. The author was listed as Charles Moulton, a combination of Gaines and Marston's names. Then, of course, there was Byrne, who typed the scripts for Marston; she, like Wonder Woman, was a very fast typist.

When Wonder Woman joined the Justice Society in *All-Star Comics* in the fall of 1942, her Justice Society plot lines were written by Gardner Fox, yet another author. Thus, readers actually had two very distinct "Wonder Women" in the early days of her existence. During the early 1940s, Wonder Woman appeared in *Sensation Comics*, *All-Star Comics*, and her own title, *Wonder Woman*. Marston wrote all of the Wonder Woman stories for *Sensation Comics* and *Wonder Woman*. However, the stories for *All-Star Comics* were split between Fox and Marston, with Fox writing any Justice Society stories, in which Wonder Woman was simply one of many characters, and Marston continuing to write any stories that primarily featured Wonder Woman. Furthermore, in the spring of 1944, Joye E. Hummel was hired to take over the typing of Marston's Wonder Woman scripts, but soon she was writing her own. This brings up interesting questions regarding the relationship between two authorial forces over one character. By the fall of 1944, Marston had contracted polio and Hummel began to write more and more of the scripts. Lepore pays relatively little attention to Hummel, privileging Marston as the true authorial presence behind Wonder Woman. In fact, Lepore's narrow focus on the Marston family as the

authors and her dismissal of other figures creates an opportunity for authorship scholars to interrogate this dynamic.

In 1947, Marston passed away; shortly afterwards, Gaines was killed and Hummel resigned, leaving Wonder Woman orphaned and authorless. Holloway attempted to get hired and execute some authorial control over Wonder Woman, but she failed. The end of WWII and a new, restrictive code adopted by the Comics Magazine Association of America killed most superheroes. Wonder Woman survived, but Lepore asserts, “she was scarcely recognizable” (271).

It is not Lepore’s highly-researched and fascinating biography of Marston and his family that makes this text of particular interest to authorial scholars, but rather the questions her book raises regarding multiple authorship: To what extent can Holloway and Byrne be considered authors of Wonder Woman? What roles do publishers, editors, and illustrators play in the authorship of highly collaborative products, such as comic books? How does authority function over a character which was authored by multiple people over decades? How does censorship affect authorship? How might we account more fully for the influence of other authorial figures (Sappho and Margaret Sanger) on the authorship of Marston? Lepore’s history of Wonder Woman provides new insights into the creation of one of popular culture’s most diverse and evolving female characters. In doing so, it also functions as a testament to the importance and complexity of multi-faceted authorship.

Meta Henty  
Texas Christian University