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## **Swapping Supers: Analyzing Gender Swapped Superheroes in American Comic Books**

**Damian Fong**

Since Superman's debut in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, white, male superheroes have dominated the comic book landscape and further codified male-centric values like power, physicality, and honor. Women were often relegated to love interests of the heroes, an accessory that could motivate the male hero. While female superheroes have always existed in comic books, for example Wonder Woman or Supergirl, they never garnered the same attention as their male compatriots and were always seen as secondary to other heroes. However, in recent years there has been a much greater push to expand the standard hero to better reflect our world. This expansion led to the creation of a much more diverse range of heroes, including people of color, LGBTQ+ heroes, and female heroes. Heroes such as Captain Marvel and She-Hulk are now receiving both comic book recognition and the chance to star in and headline their own film and television series.

Another, much more conspicuous, method of adding female superheroes into the mix has been gender swapping established, male superheroes. While this has upset some fans, as most comic book changes do, the vast majority of readers have enjoyed these new takes on classic heroes such as Thor or Spider-Man. In many ways, and for many reasons, gender swapping these heroes proved an effective way of amplifying the visibility of women in comic books and gave them the platform upon which they can flourish. Gender swapping in comic books serves as an example of third wave feminism's permeation in media and pop culture, further amplifying the voices of traditionally marginalized communities and groups.

This paper focuses on two examples of gender swapped superheroes from Marvel Comics: Carol Danvers, also known as Captain Marvel, and Jane Foster, also known as The Mighty Thor.

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These characters have long-standing histories in the Marvel Comics Universe and demonstrate different approaches to gender swapping, further revealing the roles of women in comic books.

### **Third Wave Feminism and Gender Swapping**

To better situate these new heroes in the context of society, we will begin with a discussion of third wave feminism. The factors that have most influenced third wave feminism include globalization of markets, environmental concerns, changes in demographics, sexuality, and an overall decline in economic vitality.<sup>1</sup> Third wave feminism has also been influenced by and incorporated into “the proliferation of a visual culture and the circulation of media representations of femininity.”<sup>2</sup> As a result of this change in culture, comic books are now a well-suited medium for creators of all backgrounds and identities to further explore these marginalized voices and to amplify them as a means of better representing the diversity of the real world. Moreover, comic books have become much more accessible in recent years with the advent of digital comic readers online, such as ComiXology.

Another important characteristic of third wave feminism is the multiplicity of indefinites that can be associated with feminism as a means to incorporate intersectionality as a main tenant. Addressing this intersectionality has led to “increased awareness and recognition” of the feminist identities now being practiced.<sup>3</sup> By allowing for these different identities, they can be better represented and are also afforded a platform upon which they can self-advocate for what they need as individuals and as part of marginalized groups and communities. This subjective multiplicity is important as it gives women the further latitude to relate to feminism in a way that fits them as an individual rather than as a monolithic entity. The different experiences of individual women

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and ‘New’ Femininities.” *New Femininities* (May 2013): 280.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 280

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 282.

from diverse backgrounds are “central to third-wave feminism.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of the comic book industry, this individuality and intersectionality allows for both creators and fans of the medium to find community amongst each other as a means of empowerment. Thus, third wave feminism is a part of a broader engagement with intersectionality that allows for comic books to showcase innovative representations of women.<sup>5</sup>

With that understanding of feminism, we can turn to defining gender swapping as it relates to comic book characters. Gender swapping, in its most basic form, is when a character of one particular gender is portrayed by a different character of a different gender. One example of this can be seen in Reginald Hudlin’s *Black Panther #1* (2008) where Shuri, the sister of T’Challa, King of Wakanda and the Black Panther, takes on the role and costume of the Black Panther. A more prominent example, which will be discussed further, is when Jane Foster, Thor’s former girlfriend, started to wield Mjöllnir, the mythical hammer of Thor, and became the Mighty Thor herself. Jennifer Walters, also known as the hero She-Hulk, is a gender swapped version of Bruce Banner’s alter ego the Hulk, although with a “she” prefix attached to her name. In summary, one form of gender swapping occurs when one character takes the mantle of another character or superhero of a differing gender.

### **Women’s Treatment in Comics**

In order to understand the impact of gender swapping in modern comic books, it is important to understand how women in comics, both superheroes and regular citizens, have been treated since Superman’s debut in 1938. While there have been many female superheroes in comic books since the early 1940’s, the most notable of them being Wonder Woman, they have often been

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<sup>4</sup> Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo, “Superheroes and Third-Wave Feminism.” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 382.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 383.

relegated to secondary characters in other heroes' series, and usually play the love interest of the male hero.

One way the progression of women in comic book history can be tracked is through the character Gwen Stacy, the girlfriend of Peter Parker, also known as Spider-Man, from 1965. She was first introduced as Peter Parker's love interest and was portrayed as an all-around perfect girlfriend, but she would soon be killed by the Green Goblin after Spider-Man fails to save her in time and inadvertently snaps her neck. Her death prompts Spider-Man to mature and is one example of how the comic book industry treated women at the time: as plot devices to enhance the stories and development of the male superheroes. This trope meant "reducing a major female supporting character's story options to either marriage or death is misogynistic in the way it limits a woman's potential."<sup>6</sup> Gwen's death was the catalyst in comic books that led to a maturing of readers and the medium. It also started a trend in comics known as fridging, in which superheroes would have their girlfriends or wives murdered as a way to push the hero further. For the term to have arisen demonstrates how frequently women in comics are used as a mere plot device, devoid of character, only to spur the hero to seek justice. That gendering of justice and revenge also reveals how ingrained the gender norms of the warrior and the mother are in society. Men must always be prepared to fight as it prevents any inference of undesirable femininity. Thus, with women, especially those who are love interests, treated only as plot devices, gender swapping those women into the role of the hero breaks that dynamic and offers a new interpretation of the superhero genre.

## **Comic Book Analysis**

### *Carol Danvers: Captain Marvel*

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Gianola, and Janine Coleman, "The Gwenaissance: Gwen Stacy and the Progression of Women in Comics," *Gender and the Superhero Narrative*. (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 256.

Carol Danvers is one of the oldest instances of a gender swapped superhero, however the swap did not occur all at once. First introduced in 1968, Carol Danvers was the girlfriend of Mar-Vell, the original Captain Marvel, a Kree warrior from the planet Hala. Following a heroic final act of the original Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers absorbs Mar-Vell's genetics, giving her all of his powers and becoming Ms. Marvel. She then went on to headline her own monthly comic book series, *Ms. Marvel* (1977), which lasted for twenty-three issues. Ms. Marvel would later become an Avenger and have several series over the years. Her change from Ms. Marvel to Captain Marvel, however, did not occur until 2012 in Kelly Sue DeConnick's series, *Captain Marvel*, where Carol Danvers opts to take the mantle as a way of commemorating the passing of her former boyfriend, Mar-Vell.

What is interesting to note about Carol and her Captain Marvel persona is that she, in many ways, demonstrates the fundamentals of third wave feminism. Within the context of the issue, Carol is first offered the title of "Captain" by Captain America following a battle against the Absorbing Man. At first, she is unsure if she should take the mantle before proudly proclaiming that she would "take the damn name."<sup>7</sup> At first, this seemingly puts Carol in a position wherein she would be embracing the mantle with permission from a male authority figure, in this case one that also embodies the ideal American in Captain America, thus legitimizing that power and the woman herself. However, the phrasing of her acceptance reveals that she seizes the opportunity herself, as if to say that she does not need anyone other than herself to give her that power. She is able to recognize "the conferring of the title but simultaneously declares it irrelevant."<sup>8</sup> This makes for a dynamic in which Carol finds her own way of empowerment and individuality, a previously mentioned key value of third wave feminism. Giving her the

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<sup>7</sup> Kelly Sue DeConnick, *Captain Marvel* (2012), no. 1. New York: Marvel Comics, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis, 389.

agency to take on her new title, finally completing the gender swapping of Captain Marvel, turns a moment in which a male gives power into a situation where a woman takes that power for herself. That moment of self-doubt leads into the notion of self-as-project, a postfeminist idea and major trope in the realm of superhero media.<sup>9</sup> It adds on to the ways in which Carol can find her own path as a hero without being beholden to anyone. She has the capacity to look inward and become a better hero based on this notion.

That shift from “girlfriend of a superhero” to “superhero” can also be seen in the outfits worn in the different eras of Carol Danvers’s life. Her original Ms. Marvel costume is similar to a bathing suit and serves to accentuate the breasts and overall figure, adorning them in a bright red suit with a bright yellow star, as seen in Figure 1. However, in terms of bathing suits, the Ms. Marvel costume is extremely revealing, showing her navel and bare legs from the ankle up to her short bikini bottom. This outfit is representative of the blatant and over the top sexualization female superheroes face in comics. It also represents how women in this era were often used as objects to draw in the comic book reader which, at the time, was overwhelmingly male. It serves in stark contrast to the original Captain Marvel’s suit which had almost no skin showing whatsoever. This difference reveals how the comic book medium had been centered on the male gaze and appealing to male fantasies of power, making large, imposing bodies as the ideal for strength. Furthermore, the male gaze taints the perception of women as well, seeking to objectify them into the ideal body shape for men. We see this with various other male heroes such as Captain America, Iron Man, and Superman: “[They] demonstrate how superheroes perpetuate a pre-existing script for ideal masculinity. This construction is based on the elimination of the feminine, which includes anything... that is soft, weak, connected

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

to nature, biology, and the domestic sphere.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, Ms. Marvel is then made to be inferior to men on the basis that she embodies femininity, from the revealing outfit to the prefix of “Ms.” attached to her superhero title. With this idea of eliminating the feminine, gender swapping can be seen as a way to add back some of those male characteristics in an attempt to make female heroes more well-suited for the comic book genre. We begin to see that shift, that addition of less feminine elements with the cover of *Captain Marvel #1* in 2012 from DeConnick (Figure 2). As Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers no longer wears revealing clothes, but a flight suit designed for her powers. While still skintight, it retains some level of femininity that allows for an identifiably female frame while not overtly sexualizing her as with the 1977 comic costume. This further demonstrates the impact of third wave feminism on comic book culture as women have become more involved in the world of comic books, both as creators in the case of DeConnick and as part of the overall readership.<sup>11</sup>

Captain Marvel’s gender swapping from the original male to Carol Danvers demonstrates how women have become a much more prominent component of the comic book industry, an effect of third wave feminism, which can be seen through her actions, her attitudes to powers and titles, and through her costumes.



<sup>10</sup> Esther De Dauw, *Hot Pants and Spandex Suits: Gender Representation in American Superhero Comic Books* (United States: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 59.

<sup>11</sup> David Barnett, “Kapow! The Unstoppable Rise of Female Comic Readers,” *The Guardian*, 18 Sep. 2015, (29 Oct. 2022).



*Jane Foster: The Mighty Thor*

Another example is the case of Jane Foster adopting the persona of the Mighty Thor. For distinction purposes, the original Thor will be referred to as Thor Odinson while Jane Foster’s version of the hero will be referred to as the Mighty Thor. Jane Foster previously occupied a similar role to Carol Danvers as the love interest of Donald Blake, the human form of Thor Odinson. They fell in love but were forced apart by Odin. Many years later, Jane Foster was diagnosed with breast cancer, and Thor Odinson lost his worthiness and thus his powers and the ability to wield his hammer, Mjöllnir. In proclaiming, “There must always be a Thor,” Jane Foster picks up the hammer and becomes the Mighty Thor.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to Captain Marvel, Thor’s gender swapping occurs when his girlfriend obtains his powers. Unlike Captain Marvel, Jane Foster did not have nearly forty years as her own superhero before taking on the mantle of Thor though, and the swap was much more immediate. This may be due to the prevalence of third wave feminism at this point in comic book history. By 2014, Captain Marvel had already been a prominent fixture in the Avengers, and comic books were gaining popularity with the rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. All of these factors, along with the ever-growing female readership, allowed for Jane Foster to become her own superhero.<sup>13</sup> It also served a narrative purpose to further underscore Thor Odinson’s personal struggles of godhood.



<sup>12</sup> Jason Aaron, *Thor* (2014), no. 1. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Barnett, “Kapow! The Unstoppable Rise of Female Comic Readers.”

Specifically, the removal of Odinson's powers set him on a quest to rediscover how he may once again be worthy, another instance of the "self-as-project" notion mentioned before, however, in this case it is the original male hero that must now reflect and improve. Meanwhile, Jane Foster does not need to reflect on her own heroics as evident by how easily she can wield Mjölnir and how confident she is in taking on the mantle of Thor. This dynamic reframes the idea of doubt by positioning the female and gender swapped version of the hero as the confident and powerful one, however, this still happens with the transfer of power from man to woman, and it requires that Thor Odinson lose his powers in order for Jane Foster to gain hers. This supposes that "there is only room in the universe for masculine power, regardless of which gender embodies it."<sup>14</sup> The seemingly finite amount of masculine power available demonstrates how masculinity is meant to be guarded from those who do not already possess it. Similar to Captain Marvel, power seemingly emanates from men and is only transferred to women when the men can no longer use it. In terms of third wave feminism and relating it to more individual experiences, the Mighty Thor embodies a sense of duty and urgency that comes with power. The Mighty Thor embodies the independence of finding one's own way of expressing feminism. Once again, like Captain Marvel, the Mighty Thor willingly and actively seizes the opportunity to gain power herself with no need for male validation.

Once again turning to the suits worn by the heroes, we see a similar but different occurrence with the Mighty Thor's outfit, as seen in Figure 3, compared to Captain Marvel's. The Mighty Thor is not as sexualized as Ms. Marvel's costume as there is significantly less bare skin in the outfit. The chest plate, however, still accentuates the breasts in a way that appeals more to the male gaze. This specific pose is meant to imply power, with Mjölnir

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<sup>14</sup> Amanda Rose Loeffert. "The Changing Roles of Women in American Comic Books." PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2017, 58.

carried high above, almost revering it for its power. While not completely desexualized, there is still a semblance of femininity that has not been erased with the acquisition of the new powers. From this suit we can infer that she has agency as a feminist hero because it does not shy away from the feminine features. This calls into question the balance between overt sexualization of women and the defeminization of women.



Figure 3: The Mighty Thor from Thor #1 (2014)

Unlike Captain Marvel's swap, the Mighty Thor saw a much larger social response from critical comic book readers. A vocal minority online on social media platforms expressed dismay at the swap, with many calling the move pandering, stupid, and unnecessary.<sup>15</sup> Similar sentiment has been seen among critics of the swapped hero when it was announced that Natalie Portman would portray this version of the Mighty Thor in the 2022 film, *Thor: Love and Thunder*. Many of the comments were similar in nature, this time taking aim at Marvel Studios and their apparent insistence on "identity politics instead of good story."<sup>16</sup> The criticisms of the Mighty Thor, no matter the medium, always focus on how her existence as a hero is unnecessary and serves no reason other than to pander to new audiences as a marketing ploy.

The Mighty Thor is also representative of the wider shift Marvel underwent in the mid-2010's where diversity and representation were the goals of this new era. This push for

<sup>15</sup> John Boone. "This Response to the Backlash against Marvel Making Thor a Woman Is Just Plain Awesome." *E! Online*, 17 Jul. 2014, (29 Oct. 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Shaurya Thapa. "A Thor Is Born! the Controversy around Marvel's Lady Thor Explained." *India Today*, 7 Jul. 2022, (29 Oct. 2022).

representation started with G. Willow Wilson's 2014 series, *Ms. Marvel*, in which a Pakistani teenager, Kamala Khan, becomes a hero and takes on the previous mantle of her hero, Carol Danvers. The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* sold approximately 75,000 physical issues, going through seven printings, and consistently being one of Marvel's bestsellers in digital storefronts.<sup>17</sup> The success of Kamala Khan's *Ms. Marvel* demonstrated that there was success to be had in a cast of characters and heroes that did not conform to the typical white male superhero.

Her success led to Marvel's 2015 revamp of their comic books called "All-New, All-Different." This revamp had two main goals: to grab a new audience that had not previously read comic books; and to diversify the heroes of the Marvel Universe. Both were achieved by introducing new takes on existing heroes which included Jane Foster's *Mighty Thor* and Sam Wilson, a Black man and previous partner to Steve Rogers' *Captain America*, taking the mantle of *Captain America*. The criticisms that the *Mighty Thor* saw upon her debut were echoed across the other new heroes, such as Sam Wilson's *Captain America*. Many saw these moves as further evidence that Marvel was trying to pander to audiences without any real substance for actual stories. The conceit of their complaints was, as mentioned previously, that the identity politics involved in giving these heroic mantles to new, diverse characters would impact the quality of comic books released from Marvel. Often these sentiments are charged by bigotry and intolerance, but their position begs the question as to whether or not the changing of characters to fit different identities is ultimately a move in the right direction for diversity in comics.

## Conclusion

Gender swapping heroes is an interesting method of increasing the visibility of women in comic books for both the

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<sup>17</sup> Alex Abad-Santos. "How *Ms. Marvel* Became Marvel's Most Important Superhero." *Vox*. *Vox*, 7 Jan. 2020 (29 Oct. 2022).

creators and the readers. It allows them to explore new paths to power and acceptance in a world and medium largely dominated by men. However, while these superheroes may be able to fight for themselves and better defend what they represent, it begs the question of if these gender swaps are truly effective in increasing female representation in comic books. The primary issue with these swaps is that they are ultimately limited by the fact that the female hero's powers originate from their male counterparts. In that sense, the creators of these new heroes imply that the power and potential of these women are derived from men who have an almost inherent superiority over them in terms of ability. With these implications in mind, gender swapping is hardly a way to push through the landscape for female representation by the tenants of third wave feminism. It turns out to be a faulty marketing stunt by publishers and creators that ultimately hurt the women and communities they claimed to want to amplify. It would make sense, then, that gender swapping would be detrimental to diversity, representation, and inclusion as their heroism is predicated on the fact that they must first usurp their power from their male predecessor. Men being the locus of power refutes the idea that women can have their own strength and power as individuals. In that vein, in order to increase female representation, new superheroes ought to be created that serve the role of the gender swapped heroes. Moreover, taking powers from male heroes and awarding them to women devalues that power for women as it could only be obtained by a man in the first place. In order to better represent women in comic books, new heroes like Gwen Stacy's Spider-Woman should be created that embrace femininity in a similar way to how male heroes embrace hulking frames and overt shows of strength. Third wave feminism being prominent in visual mediums allow for new ways to communicate these ideals such that people feel well represented by the media they consume.