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Powerful Women—a Man-Made Fear: Unmasking the Vilification of Women in Literature Through the Lens of Jean Grey

No other medium captures the distilled dichotomy of good versus evil better than the American comic book. For the last century, superheroes—armed with fantastical abilities and onomatopoeia—have upheld society's idea of justice by defeating their villainous counterparts. Through their victories, costumed vigilantes taught their audiences that power could be obtained through rigorous training and determination. For decades, power was reserved for those with access to magical items, alien technology, freak accidents, or those wealthy enough to afford the proper equipment. It was not until the 1960s that *X-Men* showed that power was something one could have since birth. Their powers resulted from genetic mutation, and regardless of race or gender, their abilities were a birthright that the world could not deny. Jean Grey, originally the sole woman on the team, tarnishes the X-Men's progressive allure by exposing a long-standing sexist trope that had plagued literature. When written by men, women are corrupted by their power and inevitably become the villains of their stories. Grey's journey from an innocent teenager to a genocidal maniac takes clear inspiration from history's misogyny while also mirroring cultural fears and biases towards women in power.

Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, the X-Men were a team of new heroes designed for a new age. Wartime heroes that punched Nazis no longer captured the audience's attention. As author, professor, and superhero scholar Ben Saunders states,

> Against the background of the wasteful and inconclusive war in Korea, the vicious theater of McCarthyism, and the ugly response to the first stirrings of the civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama, the moral simplicity of the superhero fantasy looked naïve at best and reactionary at worst (Saunders xiv).

Today, fans applaud *X-Men* for the progressive storylines that condemn oppression, discrimination, and racial prejudice. The same genetic mutations that granted them their abilities also contributed to their sense of otherness which resulted in the world hating and fearing them. This fictional genetic bigotry can easily be substituted for real-world discrimination against race, gender, and sexual orientation. This clear substitution has led many scholars to refer to it as "the mutant metaphor" (Edidin 114). The tactics used by the X-Men and their enemies—the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants—mirror the tactics seen in the Civil Rights Movement, with militaristic supremacy being the goal of the former and integration the goal of the latter (Park 8-9). The "mutant metaphor" represents all disenfranchised and marginalized groups and has elevated *X-Men* comics into cultural emblems hat have continued to resonate with each new generation (Parks 9).

Although praised now, the "mutant metaphor" is far from perfect, and early depictions are overtly problematic. The X-Men are good mutants who thwart their evil counterparts whose violent actions justify society's fear of them. One explanation for the comparison's poor aging is that the metaphor was never part of the original concept. Stan Lee admits that when conceiving the team's superpower origin, his decision to rely on genetic mutation was "the cowardly way out" (Lee et al. xxv). Explained in more detail, "[Lee] did not immediately recognize the social and political potential of the concept; it was just a way to avoid having to explain how the members of Marvel's latest superheroes gained their powers" (Saunders xxvi). This explains

why early issues of *X-Men* fall short in terms of social discourse; it was never meant to address them. Intentional or not, the “mutant metaphor” is now a mainstay of all *X-Men* comic books with no indication of going away.

In the 1960s, audiences enjoyed the *X-Men’s* theft of the minority experience via five white teenagers. It proved to be more entertaining and palatable to condemn discrimination through Lee’s rose-tinted lens than it was to face the spitefulness of real-world segregation. The only justification for these stories of watered down bigotry is that they functioned as a gateway for a conservative audience towards a path of acceptance. Ultimately paving the way for future comic books starring black characters such as Black Panther (1966), Falcon (1969), and Luke Cage (1972). Less fortunate remained the women in comic books, none more so than Jean Grey.

One of only three mutant women introduced in the original ’66 issue run, Grey was an outsider among outcasts. Women in comic books have always been a minority and are still outnumbered two to one by their male counterparts (Baker 36). Having not been formally introduced until page eight of the comic, only after the four other members were given time to show their proficiency in handling their abilities, Jean is forced to play catch up. The team’s founder and beneficiary, Professor Charles “X” Xavier, introduces Grey to her teammates: Angel, Beast, Cyclops, and Iceman, before taking the liberty of bestowing Grey the name “Marvel Girl.” In a single page, Professor X has taken ownership of Grey’s identity, relegating her name to that of a child as opposed to the only other gendered code name, Bobby Drake’s “Iceman”—ironically, Drake is the youngest team member. Her powers of telekinesis are first shown through the levitation of basic objects, more akin to parlor tricks than the atomic level of control she will eventually obtain. Disappointingly, Grey’s primary role on the team is to be the object of everyone’s desire. It does not take long for Hank “Beast” McCoy to attempt to steal a

kiss before Grey levitates him across the room. Beast's attempted sexual assault is played for laughs, but it is the first indicator that Grey can overpower her male counterparts (Lee et al. 12). Each member takes turns attempting to win her heart, including an admission of love from Professor X that is, fortunately, never addressed again (Lee et al. 32). Grey, of course, has other roles beyond that of a trophy in the early issues. If a villain is not holding Grey hostage to further a plot point, she is seen using her telekinesis to catch her teammates when they fall or to lift them when a ladder is unavailable. Any hint of growth beyond these expectations is quickly condemned by Professor X. For example, when testing Marvel Girl's telekinetic dexterity with a block of wood and fitted slots, she states, "Isn't this rather simple for one with my ability, Professor?" only for the Professor to snap back, "You know the rules, girl! No talking during testing period!" (Lee et al. 31). It becomes clear that in the early comics, Grey was to be of service to her male comrades and little more. She was seen and treated as a child and expected to remain as such lest she outgrow her obedience.

Judith Butler, a pioneer of gender studies, argued that gender was performative. In her own words,

> To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the 'appearance' of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power (Butler, Performativity 1).

Grey may have worn the same uniform as her teammates, but they never saw her as their equal. While she fought alongside them to save the world, Lee had no intention of portraying her

tearing down gender norms. Instead, his continual depiction of Grey as a date, damsel, or living elevator merely reestablished old gender norms in the context of superhero stories. In Butler's words, "This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Butler 526). For the first seven years of *X-Men* stories, Grey remained safe because she adhered to the ritualized role Lee prescribed her. The *X-Men* authors of the 1960s knew her place, and therefore, so did she. With issue 66, the comic was canceled but would be resurrected five years later during the height of second-wave feminism. The comic saw newfound success, but it was the beginning of the end for Grey.

Jean Grey's vilification is symbolic of the patriarchy's fear of being toppled. Fictional women become hyperbolic representations meant to warn society rather than inspire. Oppressors often view the pursuit of equality as a direct attack, and to a man in control, the thought of a woman overpowering him becomes a real danger. Couple that power with a conventionally beautiful appearance, and a misogynistic author believes he has no choice but to kill off the threat.

This tactic is anything but new and most blatantly on display in H. Rider Haggard's novel, *She*. Written in the late 1800s, *She* follows the journey of Horace Holly and his ward, Leo Vincey, on their fin de siècle adventure in an African jungle. Holly, the novel's protagonist and narrator, defines himself as "a bit of a misogynist" and exemplifies the boastful bluster of an Englishman raised on imperial propaganda (Haggard 46). Holly's sense of superiority is on full display upon arrival at an ancient lost kingdom ruled by the novel's namesake. The queen's many names—Ayesha, Hiya, and the straightforward She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed—are a hint of her power: Her personality and presence cannot be contained by a single moniker, a precursor to

the dual identities employed by comic book characters. Ayesha is more than just a queen; she has mastered ancient sorcery and achieved immortality by bathing in the Pillar of Life's fires. In defiance of Ayesha's power, Holly stubbornly maintains his sense of superiority: "I was an Englishman, and why, I asked myself, should I creep into the presence of some savage woman as though I were a monkey in fact as well as in name" (Haggard 73). In addition to her incredible power, Ayesha's beauty is so great that she hides her appearance due to the deadly arousal it elicits (Haggard 80). Regardless, Holly maintains his composure when exposed to her naked face, condemning it rather than praising it: "This beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was evil" (Haggard 81).

To Holly, masculinity trumps Ayesha's numerous abilities and positional authority. However, to overthrow her upon their first interaction would run the risk of turning her into a true immortal—a martyr. This is where the novel's "disdain for empowered women conforms to Haggard's misogynous master narrative," and Ayesha's vilification becomes necessary (Murphy 748). Whereas Holly controls his emotions and desires, Ayesha is consumed by them, as seen in her pursuit of Leo Vincey. She obsesses over Vincey, going as far as killing the citizens that she feels stand in the way of her would-be husband (Haggard 118). Ayesha's romantic obsession results in her loss of status, rule, immortality, and ultimately her life. Despite Holly and Vincey being foreign invaders that plunder and kill their way through Africa, the story's central point is that women in power can successfully rule for thousands of years. However, if they attempt to use their power and sexuality to take control of a man's world, they have gone too far and must be vanquished.

The New Woman was an emerging figure in late 19th century society and literature; she sought independence through education and career and pushed the limits of a woman's place in a

male dominated society (Murphy 747). Though the New Woman's only crime was a desire for more in life, she was met with resistance in both society and literature. This frustrating and offensive use of storytelling led scholar Patricia Murphy to claim that *She* is "a thinly disguised allegorical admonition to recognize and dispel the threat that the New Woman posed to late-Victorian society" (Murphy 747). In other words, it is not women who need to be defeated, it is merely their ambitions. Thus, in writing *She*, Haggard proposed a multistep solution to what he viewed as the "New Woman" problem: "The New Woman must first be disempowered to neutralize her threat to society. Once patriarchal authority has been restored, she can be convinced of the error of her ways and recognize that the route to happiness [exists]" (Murphy 769). It becomes clear that a formula had been established in *She*—that beauty, ambition, and power result in corruption. So long as a woman never achieves all three, she can be a hero, but only to a certain extent.

For all their nuance, comic books are not immune to referencing the past for inspiration. The jungle adventure story that captivated Haggard's audience was easily reformatted in the comic book medium. Published in 1940, *Jungle Comics* #2 contains one of the first depictions of a lead female superhero in a comic book— "Fantomah: Mystery Woman of the Jungle." The story focuses on Fantomah, a blonde, blue-eyed Caucasian woman who protects an unnamed African jungle from those who wish to harm it. She battles against elephant poachers and their ivory obsession in her debut issue. With magical abilities ranging from telekinesis to flight, Fantomah thwarts their efforts and protects her jungle and animal friends. However, one key difference between Ayesha and Fantomah is that when Fantomah uses her powers, her appearance transforms into a skull-faced woman with blue skin, thus rendering the villain formula incomplete.

X-Men was relaunched by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum in *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 five years after the original run had ended. “By the late 1970s, comics were becoming an increasingly politicized art form that included real-life scenarios, settings, and political debates played out in fictional narratives” (Purcell 132). Wein and Cockrum addressed this shift by making the team more diverse than ever before. *X-Men* now featured a member from the Apache Nation, a Russian Communist, and Ororo “Storm” Munroe—an African royal with weather-controlling powers. Storm lived as a worshiped goddess before joining the X-Men, using her powers to bring life to barren lands. To convince Storm to join and remain obedient, Professor X uses Haggard’s tactic of depowering and reprogramming; “The world I offer is not beautiful, but it is real. Far more real than the fantasy you’re living now. You are no goddess, Ororo. You are a mutant—and you have responsibilities” (Wein 7). Wein eventually turned over with writer Chris Claremont, who elevated *X-Men* from a black-and-white, monster-of-the-week narrative to a vibrant, highly interconnected soap opera spanning from outer space to multiple dimensions. In one of his first stories, he pits the new X-Men team against robotic copies of the original five members. The fight ends when the new member, Wolverine, guts a robot version of Marvel Girl, leaving her corpse sprawled on the floor (Claremont et al. 70). Although the real Jean Grey remained safe, the image was clear—Claremont was killing off Lee’s original narrative,

In the same issue that saw the death of a robotic Jean Grey, the team is onboard a defective spacecraft hurtling towards Earth and is being bombarded by deadly radiation. Grey risks her life and uses her powers to shield the team from the radiation and guide the craft to safety. Despite the immense experience she has accumulated in lowering her teammates from a fall, the strain proves to be too much, and she perishes in the crash just after saving her team. Claremont’s run on *X-Men* would prove to be a transformative one. From the wreckage that

claimed Grey's life bursts forth a new character: "Hear me, X-Men! No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever I am Phoenix!" (Claremont et al. 83).

Initially, it was explained that Grey's death resulted in her achieving her "full potential as a Psi. Becoming, briefly, an entity of pure thought, before reforming" (Claremont et al. 209). Grey now had godlike abilities and transcended her team in terms of power. The transformation also resulted in the maturing of Grey; no longer is she a young girl and the object of everyone's desire, now she is a woman with desires of her own. She experiences a sexual awakening the first time she uses her new abilities: "My power, it's hitting me like a drug. I've never felt such…ecstasy!" (Claremont et al. 164). Lenise Prater states that "the powers of [Phoenix] are sexualized…this is an essential part of the construction of [her] powers as out-of-control and particularly dangerous to men" (Prater 161). She now acts on her lustful urges, but they come at the expense of male control. Cyclops, once thought to be the most powerful member of the X-Men due to his abilities (concussive beams that burst from his eyes, which Prater "links to the phallic"), is bested by Grey who deactivates his powers, and the two share a passionate kiss that she initiates (Prater 166; Lee 30; Claremont 337). With the power castration of the X-Men's leader, Jean Grey had completed the formula that led to Ayesha's demise in *She*.

As Marvel Girl, her utility was matched only by her obedience. As Phoenix, her free will invoked fear in her teammates. For example, she uses her telepathy to avoid conflict and erases the memories of an angry X-Man's parent, or as Cyclops explains, "She used her telepathic abilities against an innocent person's mind, something that used to be an anathema to her." Storm replies, "When she uses her power as Phoenix there is a ferocity about her…and a grandeur…she has changed so much" (Claremont et al. 331). Despite Professor X regularly performing the same type of memory tampering, the team resents Jean for have going too far

because they deem out of character regardless of the double standard (Lee et al. 40). Even Grey expresses fear in the "quantum leap" her powers have taken: "You're worried about whether I can handle it. Well, I'm worried, too" (Claremont et al. 209).

Claremont's bold new direction for Grey was not initially meant to vilify her. "Our intent then was to create an X-Men analog, if you will, to Thor—someone who was essentially the first female cosmic hero. We thought at the time that we could integrate her into the book as well as Thor had been integrated into the Avengers" (Claremont et al. 618). Unfortunately, the rest of the creative team was not on board. John Byrne, the series' penciller, expressed a desire to get rid of Phoenix altogether, and stated, "I didn't like Phoenix since the word *go*. Because she instantly made the rest of the X-Men fifth wheels, you know? And she wasn't even an X-Man" (Claremont et al. 616). Despite Thor setting a precedent with the Avengers, a new story known as the *Dark Phoenix Saga* would grant Byrne his wish.

In the world of *X-Men* exists the Hellfire Club, a cabal of wealthy mutants focused on world domination. While Grey's teammates were apprehensive toward her Phoenix powers, the Hellfire Club was determined to take advantage of them. To do so, they began weaponizing Haggard's attack against the New Woman—depower and reprogram. Jason "Mastermind" Wyngarde possessed the mutant ability to cast ultra-realistic illusions indistinguishable from reality. Throughout Claremont's run, Mastermind is seen using this ability to toy with Jean's mind and fracture her psyche into something he and the Hellfire Club could control (Claremont et al. 214). The emotional abuse and alluded sexual assault enacted by Mastermind prove successful; Jean, now dressed in black lingerie, dawns the persona of the Black Queen, a full-fledged member of the Hellfire Club (Claremont et al. 342).

As the Black Queen, Jean Grey has taken on her first real villain persona. She may be fighting against her teammates, but Mastermind is pulling the strings, allowing room for her redemption. Like Professor X before him, Mastermind keeps Grey and her power in check. As the X-Men defeat the Hellfire Club, Mastermind loses his control over the Black Queen. Coupled with the release of her telepathic abilities earlier in the story, the ordeal has released all checks and balances on the powers of the Phoenix. With the men no longer dictating her actions, Jean is left to shoulder the burden of the Phoenix and the result is a complete loss of control—and yet another emergence of a new persona—Dark Phoenix (Claremont et al. 385). As Lenise Prater states, "Dark Phoenix is everything Jean Grey is not: demanding, extremely powerful, and does not care about anything but herself and her own pleasure" (162),

She lashes out and defeats her team easily before heading into space to quench her thirst for more power. She plunges into a star, galaxies away, causing a supernova. Like the first time she used the power of the Phoenix, she experiences sexual pleasure: "In the center of the supernova she created, Dark Phoenix thrills to the absolute power that is hers. She is in ecstasy" (Claremont et al. 399). Her embrace of greed, power, and sexual gratification is seemingly harmless until the star's explosion destroys the planet D'Bari and its five billion inhabitants.

In a comic book that features WWII holocaust survivors as recurring characters, having Dark Phoenix commit genocide was seen as going too far (Purcell 136). Even Claremont regretted the decision: "The original intent to turn her into a bad villain got lost for me about two-thirds of the way, when I suddenly started thinking we're doing this to Jean Grey with whom I've always been deeply involved" (Claremont et al. 619). The attempt to course-correct the decision was also problematic, however, initial blame is justifiably placed on Professor X. As Dark Phoenix, she states, "Why, [Professor X], you sound almost guilty, as well you should!

You unleashed my latent telepathic ability. You set in motion the chain of events that created first Phoenix and then, Dark Phoenix!…I am Power!" (Claremont et al. 418-419). Oppression, in any form, will always result in violence. For years, Professor X had implemented safety blocks on Jean's abilities, but by the time she had overpowered the restrictions, she lacked any experience to control her powers to their full extent. Here, Grey openly admits that Professor X is to blame because he attempted to alter who she was and strip her of her natural abilities. Professor X never trusted Phoenix, but worse still, he never trusted Jean. As he explains,

> The simple explanation…is that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Phoenix is the ultimate expression of Jean's potential as a psi. Too much power, I fear, too soon. Jean is too young, she lacks the…awareness necessary to control her now limitless abilities (Claremont et al. 396).

Professor X's logic is flawed. He is allowed to enjoy his seat of power without a doubt that he is in control. Regardless of their relationship, anyone who threatens his sense of superiority is vilified and made a target. He was her teacher, and he failed her. He enjoyed a sense of comfort knowing he could control and keep her abilities in check. The comic frames Professor X's loss of control as that of a victim, while Jean's is a force of evil. He never saw his power as a corrupting force, though the results speak for themselves.

Professor X's—and Claremont's—response is not the apology one would hope for, but instead a call for more bondage: "Power without restraint, knowledge without wisdom, age without maturity, passion without love. I must fight you, Jean! I must…I will win!" (Claremont et al. 419). Professor X succeeds in binding the Dark Phoenix, and as Jean Grey descends, now robbed of her power and clothing, Cyclops takes one last opportunity to shackle her further in the

form of a marriage proposal (Claremont et al. 420). The sexual liberation she experienced as Phoenix is now contained within a traditional union.

Without regard for the banishment of the Phoenix persona, an intergalactic tribunal charges Jean for the destruction and genocide of D'Bari. She dresses in her old costume and reassumes the name Marvel Girl to distance herself from the Dark Phoenix persona, regressing into the obedient teammate she once was (Claremont et al. 433). Inevitably, the Dark Phoenix resurfaces, this time with a new explanation regarding its origin. As mentioned, Phoenix came about from Jean Grey actualizing her full potential, but to absolve her from her crimes, Claremont reveals the Phoenix is the cosmic embodiment of death and rebirth that used Jean as a host: "Two beings…Jean Grey and Phoenix, separate, unique, bound together. A symbiote" (Claremont et al. 455, 491). In her last moments of lucidity, she takes her own life before the Dark Phoenix can regain control and cause more destruction. Claremont kills Dark Phoenix while making a martyr out of Jean Grey, the ultimate reward for the obedient girl defeating the ambitious woman.

Establishing Jean Grey and the Phoenix as separate entities meant to absolve Grey of the crimes committed during the *Dark Phoenix Saga*. In many ways, this was successful, but the message that women were unable to handle too much power and could not be trusted with it remained. Like the regression from Phoenix to Marvel Girl, the comic industry lapsed regarding positive female representation. Stories became hyperbolic, as did their characters, both in writing and art. Male superheroes were more likely to be presented as strong, muscular, threatening, and levelheaded in a crisis (Baker 36). Comic books have always pandered to a male audience, however, the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of "extreme hypermasculinity," which was "defined by what is not, namely 'feminine' and all its associated traits—hard not soft, strong not

weak, reserved not emotional, active not passive" (Mahn 116; Brown 26-27). The practical yet unflattering jumpsuit costumes of the 1960s were quickly replaced with skintight spandex which displayed male power by accentuating a muscular physique and sexualized women through an overemphasis on their curves (Brown 31).

No X-Man embodies this rigid gendering more than Wolverine. Arguably, the most popular X-Man, Wolverine, is the "apex of masculinity" and what pop culture scholar Gerri Mahn refers to as "the hegemonic male" (Mahn 118). His mutant healing factor and unbreakable bones made it so he could fight harder than the rest of his teammates, while his muscles and claws enabled him to overcome any enemy he faced. He was designed to kill, but because his rage was focused on a cause for good, his morals were rarely questioned.

> In many ways, Wolverine was the idealized male. He overcame any weakness he experienced as a child, either in character or in physicality. He experienced personal tragedy and emotional trauma, yet continued to thrive. He was a warrior; who could fight with a brutal, animalistic, skill or comport himself with the Zen-like control of a trained samurai. Yet it was that animalistic, nearly feral, side to his personality which linked his identity to the hypermasculinity of the uncultured and uncivilized (Mahn 118-119).

Wolverine was crass and brutal; his primal power proved that rage and violence were more effective in defeating enemies than empathy and reason ever were. Throughout the *Dark Phoenix Saga*, it is Wolverine who first attempts to kill Phoenix while the rest of the team fails to reason with her: "[Phoenix] is still too strong fer us, an' gettin' stronger all the time. I got no choice, I gotta end this now! Permanently!" (Claremont et al. 415). In brief moments of clarity, Jean begs Wolverine to end her life, converting an act of murder to one of charity. Over the years, different

versions and retellings of the *Dark Phoenix Saga* have always placed the burden of murder on Wolverine, implying that only the hypermasculine is capable of killing the hyperfeminine.

The strict adherence to the gender dichotomy proved successful for the comic book industry, especially for *X-Men*, which had become Marvel Comics' most popular series in the 1980s and 1990s (Saunders i). Stories took on a darker, grittier tone; villains also changed and were now more psychopathic and murderous in their intentions rather than the megalomaniacs obsessed with world domination they once were. Female characters remained love interests and plot devices, but if they wanted to thrive, they needed to cast off the notion of female power and embrace the masculine, no matter how toxic it proved to be.

Masculinizing women and calling it female empowerment is not a new literary tactic. In 1918, D.H. Lawrence published the short story "Tickets, Please!" The story inverts gender roles as a result of WWI, with women taking on jobs left vacant by men off fighting in the war. The character Annie Stone fully embraces her newfound independence and agency as a ticket inspector. She enjoys the power that society once held over her, now being the one to dictate where someone belongs. Professor Hongmei Li explains that in Lawrence's story,

> Women were given the chance to move into occupations traditionally taken by males such as the tramline service. The woman, now, seemed not to be 'the other,' or the object whose existence was defined and interpreted by the male, who was the dominant being in society. Rather, the tram conductresses took an 'adventure' each day, who daringly accepted the dangers of the tram journeys and the male passengers' advances (Li 2287).

John Raynor, one of the few men who managed to avoid the war, lustfully pursues Stone and her coworkers. He lies and toys with the women's emotions, seeing them as sexual conquests rather

than people. With their new independence and authority, they seek to institute revenge on Raynor rather than allow him to get away with his behavior. The women confront him and attempt to make him choose "which of us you'll have, do you hear, and stop your little games. We'll settle you" (Lawrence). Raynor's excusal from the war threw his masculinity into question, his sexual promiscuity was now the only symbol of power he had left, and he was being forced to relinquish it in the form of monogamy—similar to the way that Phoenix enjoyed sexual gratification with her power, but Cyclops's proposal forced her to focus that desire on him, resulting in any pleasure derived outside of that union considered immoral and wrong.

What began as a simple ambush to confront Raynor and his behavior quickly turned to violence. "He was their sport now. They were going to have their own back, out of him. Strange, wild creatures, they hung on him and rushed at him to bear him down. His tunic was torn right up the back. Nora had hold at the back of his collar and was actually strangling him" (Lawrence). Li states, "The girls take priority over John in force and number. John has never realized that he will be reduced to prey, a sport: he falls into the trap" (Li 2289). Bloodied and defeated, Raynor submits and picks Stone to be his beloved. The final defeat comes with Stone's rejection of Raynor, completely emasculating the man and leaving him to collect his things and walk off into the night as the women "continued in silence to dress their hair and adjust their clothing, as if he had never existed" (Lawrence). Lawrence deconstructs the wartime love story, showing a world where men are impotent in the face of "masculinized" women (Li 2289).

The women in "Tickets, Please!" are triumphant over Raynor and patriarchy, however, Lawrence's feminism is shortsighted and lacking. Their victory is shallow considering nothing is gained; Raynor's masculinity is merely robbed. The women's violence was understandable and arguably warranted, but it ended in excess. Their actions likened them more to wild animals than

human beings. A byproduct of their attack could be the justification of the fears held by Haggard and misogynists alike. No longer were the women the martyrs of their own story, but perpetrators no better than their former oppressors.

Lawrence inverted the gender binary, his story showing that masculine strength will always trump feminine weakness, regardless of who wields it. Virginia Woolf addresses this power disparity in *A Room of One's Own* by calling for a transcendence of binary opposition and instead an embrace of the "androgynous mind" (Woolf 98). Unlike Lawrence, "Woolf's aim is directly to destabilize the British patriarchy, without forming a matriarchy out of its ashes" (Sheikh 20). The 1990s continued to profit from hypermasculinity, but there were authors who chose to take risks. Jean's cycle of death and rebirth remained, but instead of returning as more powerful and corrupt, her status as a hero was periodically left untarnished.

Whether due to dwindling sales or to combat the effects of time, comic books will occasionally reboot their story's origins, ensuring the characters are perpetually young enough for respective audiences to relate to. The gimmick also allows new creative teams to tackle contemporary issues from a fresh perspective. The X-Men team of the 1990s saw the return of Jean Grey—no longer in possession of the Phoenix's power—now a respected team member instead of the damsel she once was. Grey's new characterization is best displayed in Fabian Nicieza's *X-Men* #28, "Devil in the House." Like the men off fighting in WWI in "Tickets, Please!," Wolverine is off on a personal mission, his return left in question, leaving the team to fill the power vacuum he has left behind. Nicieza's comic revolves around the capture and attempted rehabilitation of Victor "Sabretooth" Creed—arch nemesis and self-proclaimed "dark reflection" of Wolverine (Nicieza 17). Sabretooth embodies all of Wolverine's masculine traits to such excess that he becomes a caricature of them. The X-Men see his savagery and barbarism

as evidence that he “more than meets the requirements for a wild animal” (Nicieza 9). Nicieza depicts Professor X as far more understanding and empathetic than his original portrayal thirty years prior, but his desire to rehabilitate through control is ever present. Sabretooth is locked away and force-fed tranquilizers and given “psychic injections” to treat his bouts of violent rage (Nicieza 4,7). Despite this being Professor X’s project, the delivery of raw meat and psychic intervention is left to the women on the team. Psylocke—a trained ninja with the ability to manifest her psychic power as a physical blade—is attacked by Creed on one such delivery. She embraces the violence and fights back, but unlike the events in “Tickets, Please!,” Creed overcomes Psylocke and forces a kiss before tossing her outside his cell (Nicieza 8). The scene affirms Sabretooth’s role as the villain, and it also shows that despite his imprisonment, he is the one in control. To the patriarchy, a woman’s positional authority is no match for a man’s believed superiority. What is unique about Nicieza’s linkage of Sabretooth and the male hegemony is that it is one of the few instances where male dominance is not praised, but framed as something that needs to be defeated.

Nicieza’s story grows closer to Woolf’s ideal for an “androgynous mind” in the following scene. The next to interact with Creed is the character Rogue—only this time, she is accompanied by her beau, Remy. Remy attempts to emasculate Creed, commenting on his meal: “Gotta watch that girlish figure Sabey,” only for Rogue to snap back, “Ah’m warnin’ ya, Remy! Don”t antagonize him” (Nicieza 10). The couple adheres to their prescribed gender roles, the artwork showing Remy standing tall and in defiance of Creed, Rogue on her knees, draped on Remy’s arm. Remy’s performance is that of the aggressive male, territorial of his love interest, while Rogue wishes to de-escalate. Creed chooses a psychological attack rather than a physical one, attempting to pit the two against each other. The confrontation ends without violence, and

nothing is gained or lost on either side. The stalemate represents progress in pairing male and female power, but the strict segregation and lack of true combination denies the X-Men a proper victory.

While Sabretooth is busy tormenting various members of the X-Men, Jean is trying to come to terms with her emotions surrounding Wolverine's departure. Unlike Claremont's run, Wolverine's attraction towards Jean was no longer one-sided. Nicieza uses Cyclops's remark, "I can see how that excitement always appealed to you…you and he always shared that passion for life," to begin establishing a blending of the two characters. Jean replies, "It wasn't so much what I saw in him as what he made me see in myself. It frightened me. I saw a side I didn't think existed. A side I liked" (Nicieza 15). The stories before condemned Phoenix's desires as self-gratifying; now that they are caused and shared by Wolverine, they are understood and accepted.

Sick of Creed's torment of her team, as well as Professor X's passive approach, Grey confronts him. Creed lashes out immediately, but Jean uses her telepathy to easily overpower him. The interaction plays out similarly to Raynor's inability to fight back against the tram women, with Jean remarking on the power gap between them: "You're a firecracker Creed…and I'm an atom bomb" (Nicieza 18). Unlike Stone and Raynor, however, Jean stops just prior to physically breaking Creed and instead says, "Deal with what you are. With what you've done. Face up to your crimes, Creed, and to your victims. Stop running away for once…because there's no place left to run…do you have the guts to do it?" (Nicieza 20). Grey's victory does not topple the patriarchy; it holds a mirror up to it and makes clear that it is not the New Woman who is the villain, but itself. Grey took on the role of the X-Men's muscle and defender in Wolverine's absence, but she did it on her terms. She embraced her power, and through the support and understanding of those around her, she exerted her own control rather than having it

forced upon her. Ultimately, Jean never emasculates Sabretooth. His power remains, but he is forced to recognize her as his superior. The issue ends with a young girl delivering food to Creed, who now sits calmly in his cell. Before the girl leaves, he asks her, “Tell [Jean] she’s the one with guts. Real guts. Tell her [Wolverine] couldn’t o’ done better” (Nicieza 21). Jean is given credit for the victory, but it was through the blending of gendered power that she was able to do so.

Unfortunately, the positive portrayal of female empowerment in “Devil in the House” is an outlier. As a single issue, it is overshadowed both in popularity and quantity by stories like the *Dark Phoenix Saga*. The influence that reality has on fiction is far from one-sided, and the more popular the comic, the more sway it has on society. Parables have long been used to teach children morality, and stories involving superheroes are especially receptive to a younger audience (Baker 27). The misogyny and fear of empowered women in comic books then bleed back into society, creating loop of fictional depictions that result in real terror and vice versa.

Women in power are tolerated in comic books because we have repeatedly seen that they can be defeated. That safety switch is less assured in the real world, resulting in trepidation and condemnation of anyone acting outside their accepted gender roles. As Judith Butler says,

> Gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence (Butler 527).

In other words, while women with power in a comic book are considered super, in the real world, they are seen as a threat and condemned as witches.

The term "witch" has been likened to women in power as far back as ancient Greece, and as recently and notably as the 2016 presidential election; with doctored images of Hilary Clinton with the likeness of a cartoon witch flooding social media throughout her campaign (Miller). The tactic used by Claremont to absolve Jean—the Phoenix force possessing her—has also been used to condemn women in reality. Often, society has been shown to more plausibly believe that female accomplishment is the result of demonic intervention rather than through skill or merit. For example, "Joan of Arc led the French to victory against the English and was renowned in France for her purity, cleverness, and faith in her 'voices.' When the English leadership couldn't beat her, they undermined her, crediting her success to demonic means" (Miller).

The members of the X-Men have varying flaws that stand in contrast to their powers. For example, Cyclops acts as the levelheaded leader who is trusted to keep his team's powers and actions in check, and yet, he is unable to control his ability, instead having to rely on a specially designed visor to function in society. Similarly, Professor X's powerful mind is housed in a broken body, relegated to a wheelchair. Jean was never depicted as having her own hamartia; thus, authors and villains condemn her personality instead. The lack of a symbolic flaw that humanizes people in power is met with a similar tactic in the real world—especially for women. "The misogyny of all this is obvious. Debating and defeating these leaders politically isn't enough—as women who show ambition, they are abominations who must be deemed evil and cast out" (Miller). This tactic has proven time and again to be successful in limiting a woman's ambition; at its worst, it results in their death.

When Jean Grey defeated Sabretooth, she used her power to expose his crimes to the audience and himself. A similar instance occurred in 2012 when Julia Gillard, the first female Prime Minister of Australia, delivered a speech in response to the sexism and misogyny

perpetuated by the leader of the Opposition Party, Tony Abbott. Abbott and those like him were forced to listen as Gillard exposed their misogyny on the parliament floor.

> I was offended when the Leader of the Opposition went outside in the front of Parliament and stood next to a sign that said, "Ditch the witch." I was offended when the Leader of the Opposition stood next to a sign that described me as a man's bitch. I was offended by those things. Misogyny, sexism, every day from this Leader of the Opposition. Every day in every way, across the time the Leader of the Opposition has sat in that chair, and I've sat in this chair (Gillard).

Gillard never questions or threatens Abbott's masculinity, instead, she exposes the fact that Abbott had no platform to stand on other than sexism, leaving her audience and his constituents left to question his competency and ability to lead. Like Sabretooth, Abbott's claws and fangs remain, but the realization that they are not as sharp as he once thought is now forever present.

The attacks carried out willfully by misogynists like Haggard, as well as the mistakes made by the well-intentioned Lawrence and Claremont, have hindered female progress but never truly stopped it.

> We stand therefore at a crossroads—which is fitting, since crossroads are sacred to Hecate, Greek goddess of witchcraft. Will we continue to fear and punish women with power? To call them evil? Or perhaps we can at last celebrate female strength, recognizing that witches—and women—are not going away (Miller).

Jean Grey became the villain of her story because the men in her life—fictional and real—feared her. Authors worried that she would render their male characters unnecessary, so they created a narrative that audiences were more likely to accept. The timid girl who once knew her place was

now one of *X-Men's* most iconic villains—a clear message to impressionable readers on the dangers of change. For centuries, men have enjoyed this level of control over a woman's place in fiction, and society. With each new generation comes progress and a weakening of that stronghold; however, as female authors and characters grow in prominence and power, a new requirement is needed to avoid replacing one gendered hegemony for another—*respect*. In replacing *fear* with *respect*, achievement by another is then no longer considered a threat. By hoarding the spotlight, men have left everyone else in the dark. By sharing it, hidden potential can now be on vibrant display. Like the Phoenix incarnate, the old narrative of women unable to control power needs to be burned down for something better to rise from the ashes.

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