

Glory bound. On Wonder Woman's bracelets

Suzanne Ramljak



(Detail) publicity photo of Lynda Carter, star of *Wonder Woman* television series, 1975. Warner Bros. Television

Since bursting onto the cultural stage in 1941, Wonder Woman has become the world's most popular, and enduring, comic book heroine. For her battles against injustice and oppression, she boasts superhuman powers and customized gear including the Lasso of Truth, Invisible Plane, and Mental Radio. Ultimately, Wonder Woman's most potent accessory proves to be the jewelry that she wears. Her metal Bracelets of Submission, also called Bands of Aphrodite or Magic Bracelets, are indestructible cuffs that shield against violent attack, deflecting gunfire, missiles, and other projectiles. A key feature of the fiction conceived by Wonder Woman's creator, William Moulton Marston, these shackle-like bands ensure her survival and embody core values fueling her mission on Earth.

Indeed, Wonder Woman's wristbands harbor a conceptual arsenal that Marston, a noted psychologist, lawyer, and inventor,¹ honed for decades

before hatching this superhero. A staunch advocate of women's rights and female supremacy, Marston declared in the late 1930s: "The next 100 years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy, a nation of Amazons in the psychological rather than the physical sense."² Within his comic strip cosmology, Wonder Woman, a.k.a. Princess Diana, belongs to a mythical Amazon tribe. Having once been tricked into enslavement by Hercules, who bound them with chains and armbands, Marston's Amazons wear thick bracelets as reminders of former slavery and the need to resist the wiles of men.

In addition to warning of male subjugation, these Bracelets of Submission affirm an Amazonian pledge to Aphrodite's Law, upholding humanizing principles of love, beauty, wisdom, and justice. By submitting to a superior authority and harnessing her strength for the greater good, Wonder Woman is assured triumph over the forces of evil. Should she



Debut cover of Wonder Woman character in Sensation Comics, 1942

defy Aphrodite and remove the cuffs, her superpowers wane. On Earth as it is in comics, love conquers all with a selflessness that can disarm anger and greed. As symbols of altruism, Wonder Woman's bands serve as metaphors for Marston's own social theories, as he stated: "Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world."³

Along with Wonder Woman's mythological provenance, she has mortal roots in Marston's private life. Married to Elizabeth Holloway, a fellow lawyer, psychologist, and feminist thinker, he also fell in love with his assistant, Olive Byrne; he fathered children with both women, and all lived together as an extended family.

While Holloway wore a wedding ring, Byrne sported bracelets on both wrists as a token of love. The worldly ties to Wonder Woman's wristbands go beyond the personal to engage cultural issues of the day. Throughout the early comic strip, the Amazon princess is repeatedly shown chained, bound, and gagged. These were not gratuitous bondage scenes, but instead echoed the iconography of fetters prevalent in the women's rights movement, where chains were central to the rhetoric and protests of those fighting against female servitude. Marston was near the frontline of those struggles, as Byrne's aunt was leading activist Margaret Sanger, who opened the first birth control clinic in the U.S.

Wonder Woman's bracelets, born of fancy and fact, emerge as hybrid ornaments; part manacle and part resistance band, they speak at once of oppression and liberation. Within the context of jewelry history, they could be viewed as a kind of amulet. Indeed, in the Amazon's fictional realm, her bands were forged from Athena's shield and are imbued with the warrior goddess' wisdom and strength. These mythic cuffs also



Drawing by Harry G. Peter for William Moulton Marston's 1944 article, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics"

rules for pleasure and identity.⁴ Unlike actual slavery, it is not about weakness, but rather about finding the means to harness and unleash one's own forces. Similar to bondage accessories, jewelry can also serve to empower and focus the self. Wonder Woman's bracelets, though based on slave shackles, transmit such a message of emancipation and the glory of unbounded women.

function as memory aids or memorial jewelry, lest the crimes of the past be forgotten. In this regard, they are akin to metal POW/MIA bands worn during the Vietnam War or the more recent "Never Forget" bracelets honoring those killed in the 9/11 attacks.

Then there is the affinity between Wonder Woman's wristbands and sexual bondage gear, a connection furthered by her corset and high boots. Within BDSM practices—which entail various forms of bondage, discipline, dominance, and submission—the trappings include all manner of collars, harnesses, chains, and cuffs. Enacted by consenting adults, the dominant/submissive, master/slave interplay is a type of "aesthetic sexuality," creatively shaping

- 1 William Moulton Marston (1893-1947) is credited with inventing the early lie-detector test, based on changes in a subject's blood pressure. Among his publications are *Emotions of Normal People* (1928), *You Can Be Popular* (1936), and *March On! Facing Life with Courage* (1941).
- 2 "Neglected Amazons to Rule Men in 1,000 Years, Says Psychologist," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1937.
- 3 Marston in undated letter to comics historian Coulton Waugh.
- 4 Deborah Teramis Christian, "BDSM Defined: An Exploration of Adult Sexuality and Lifestyles," www.teramis.com.

Further reading

Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015)

Gloria Steinem and Phyllis Chesler, *Wonder Woman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972)

Jay Wiseman, *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction* (Emeryville, CA: Greenery Press, 1996)