

A WOMAN’S PLACE IS IN THE RESISTANCE:  
THE POWER OF THE FEMALE ROLE MODEL

by

Kelsey Taryn Kuszmaul Stottlemeyer

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Accepted:

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(Dr. Paige Eager)  
Committee Member

---

(Dr. Noel Verzosa)  
Program Director

---

(Dr. Katherine Orloff)  
Committee Member

---

April M. Boulton, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

---

(Dr. Heather Mitchell-Buck)  
Thesis Advisor

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## Abstract

What makes a good role model? The women's marches that took place beginning in 2017 provide us with a somewhat unexpected answer. These marches not only protested the election of the 45th President of the United States but also spoke out against the ways that women's autonomy and voices have been threatened around the world. Marchers lifted protest signs depicting strong, independent, iconic women to support their message, including a variety of figures from pop culture who have refused to accept the injustices that they face in their own fictional worlds. These signs helped to give the marchers' message another level of meaning.

This paper will consider three famous female characters who appeared repeatedly on these protest signs: Wonder Woman (from DC Comics), Princess Leia (from the *Star Wars* saga) and Hermione Granger (from the *Harry Potter* series). These three figures are valuable role models for women because they exhibit kindness, intelligence, wit, and a passion for justice—even in the face of insurmountable odds. Thus, they serve as tangible examples for a global community looking to spread a message of hope and equity and to inspire others to stand up for women's rights.

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to:

My thesis advisor, Dr. Heather Mitchell-Buck, who was the most patient, fun, and constant supporter of me and my work. You are an absolute rock star and I loved every single moment we got to work together. I cannot say thank you enough.

My two readers, Dr. Paige Eager and Dr. Katherine Orloff. Thank you for your flexibility, support, and insightful assistance with this project.

My husband, Jesse, without whom this work (and my heart) would be quite incomplete. You just make life better in every way.

My mother, Terry, who is my main motivation to be a strong, altruistic individual and a badass woman. I can't believe I get to be your daughter and your legacy.

My father, Harry, who has loved me every single second of my life, made me laugh for most of it, and taught me how to use the tools I have to be myself in every way. You're the best dad-mom ever.

My lovely friend and coworker, Traci Holland, who was so supportive and one of my most vehement cheerleaders throughout my entire graduate program. Your patience, encouragement, laughs, and willingness to give generous deadlines are endless.

The goddesses I call family: Kristen Diehl, Amanda Brenner, Jenny Diamond, Patricia Kohler, Megan Wonders, Annie Fawcett, Gina Stielper-Palcher, Alainna White, Lindsay Kraft, Karyn Kraft, and of course, my Meowcat ladies. You wondrous women inspire me daily to be the absolute best version of myself.

The faculty and students of the Humanities program at Hood College. I loved this program and everyone in it. You all are just the best of everything. Thanks for the fun.



# A Woman's Place is in the Resistance:

## The Power of the Female Role Model<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: Welcome to the Rebellion

#### Project Overview

This paper will consider the idea of pop culture characters as role models by charting the development of female characters over time. To demonstrate this, I use three specific characters who were frequently featured on homemade protest signs at the 2017 Women's Marches.<sup>2</sup> The Women's Marches around the world that were sparked by the election of the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States not only protested him, but protested the mistreatment of women across the globe. People lifted signs of female figures from all sorts of media to support their claims and to give their message another level of connection for those who would see their signs. They wielded protest signs with depictions of strong, independent, iconic women who did not stand for the injustices that they faced in their own worlds. The three characters featured in this work are Wonder Woman (from DC Comics), Princess Leia (from the *Star Wars* saga), and Hermione Granger (from the *Harry Potter* series).

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1. Megan de Bruin-Mole, "Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses: Star Wars and Popular Feminism," in *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*, ed. Guynes Sean and Hassler-Forest Dan, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 238; Hayley Gilmore, "Portfolio of Work," Hayley Gilmore, accessed January 1, 2021, <https://www.hayleygilmore.com/work#/womensmarch>.  
The title of this paper was greatly inspired by these two works.

2. Women's March, accessed January 17, 2017, <https://womensmarch.com>.

Because of the visibility these three female characters have within the realm of global culture, their call for equality rings true to women and their allies across the world. They represent tangible examples for a worldwide community of women who are finding new ways to utilize media culture to spread a message of hope and equity. While their superpowers, special skills, and magic are important to *their* stories, these women show us that love, courage, and tenacity are truly what make a difference in our own stories. We look to these three figures as role models not because of their special powers, but because of their kindness, intelligence, wit, and passion for humanity.

Surprisingly (or maybe not!), these three characters each fit appropriately within the definitions of the first three waves of feminism, respectively. Wonder Woman first appeared as a character during first wave of feminism which “occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and is commonly associated with women’s suffrage. It majorly concerned de jure sexism, which dealt with women’s legal rights. A chief accomplishment of First Wave feminism was the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which allowed American women to vote.”<sup>3</sup> Then, Princess Leia was introduced during the second wave of feminism which began in the 1960s and 70s and sought to combat sexism within the social realm by fighting for services like paid maternity leave, equitable hiring, affordable childcare, and birth control.<sup>4</sup> “The Second Wave of feminism was limited, though, by its over-generalization of women. This wave concentrated mainly on heterosexual, middle class, Caucasian women. Other women who did not conform or belong to these categories were left as outsiders to a movement intending to

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3. Christopher E. Bell, introduction to *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 2.

4. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 3.

benefit an entire gender, without effectively taking its diversity into consideration.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Hermione appeared during the third wave of feminism, which directly sought to combat this inequality with intersectionality and inclusivity. “Third Wave feminism gained momentum as a result [of the second wave] in the 1990s, and advocated for the women of various sexual orientations, classes, ethnicities and races.”<sup>6</sup> It seems appropriate that each of these iconic figures was introduced during landmark moments in the fight for women’s rights and equality, because they represent women’s history within the sphere of pop culture. Over time, women’s roles in pop culture have adapted alongside women’s roles in the real world.

This project aims to understand why these three particular characters were so frequently featured on protest signs and how that speaks to the influence that they as role models have upon people. The paper begins with a bit of personal history and a discussion of the significance of women’s empowerment to me personally. Following that is a chapter for each character in which I discuss the context of her creation and the ways she has had direct influence upon women, feminism, and pop culture. The figures are presented in chronological order of when each of their stories were initially presented. Chapter One introduces the origins of my pop culture connection with an exploration of the creation of Wonder Woman, her original comics, and later the 2017 film. I also discuss Wonder Woman’s somewhat tumultuous relationship with feminism over the years and where it stands today. Chapter Two offers insight into Princess Leia’s character, through a discussion of the original *Star Wars* film trilogy as well as

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5. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 3.

6. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 3.

academic works and essays that deal with Leia as a feminist and the relationship that female fans have with her as a character. Chapter Three primarily examines Hermione in the original *Harry Potter* book series and then connects her book character to academic works that discuss her place as a role model and feminist. I also reference her relationship with fans – particularly Millennial women – and how she has helped those fans define themselves as both readers and feminists. To conclude, I discuss the future of this topic and its potential impact upon women today and in the future.

My perspective as a white, middle-class, Millennial woman has certainly shaped this project. While my background and upbringing did not *determine* the figures used in this project, it is sadly unsurprising that this assumption could be made. All three characters in this work are perceivably white and at least middle class, if not actual royalty. All three have had a lasting impact because they are characters in successful franchises – and successful franchises are largely marketed toward white, middle-class audiences. This obviously needs to change as it is not representative of the global populace of women. Thankfully, this change is beginning to occur as we see more leading ladies of color, of varying sexual orientations, and of all different socioeconomic backgrounds. So, with the understanding that the evolution of feminism is ongoing, this work aims to understand where pop culture's representation of feminism began, where it led, and where it might lead next.

Throughout this paper, I will use the first-person pronouns (I/me; we/us) when speaking about current events. My goal is to connect the reader with the feminist cause and understand the visceral reaction that many women experienced when the 45<sup>th</sup> president was declared the winner of the 2016 US presidential election and took office. I recognize that there are feelings expressed here that may sound controversial or overtly

political to some. However, it would feel disingenuous, if not impossible, to try to address this topic in an “objective” way.

## Project Background

One of the strongest women to have ever graced this planet is my mother, Terry Ann Stielper Kuszmaul. She was born in Baltimore in the early summer of 1958. She left home at 15, got her GED, and found a job, buying a car before she could legally drive it on her own. Despite the hardships she faced, she remained fiercely independent, was giving to a fault, and had the biggest heart imaginable. Through nearly constant health issues that spanned the majority of her life, she always put me first, teaching me to be kind and courteous, but unafraid to speak my mind. I was brought up to know that I had a voice and was encouraged to use it. Though she had no actual superpowers (that I know of), she was and still is my superhero. My mother always felt like magic to me – possessing the charm and grace to exist as a singularly lovely human being, but also maintaining a quiet strength and intelligent voice to inspire and challenge others. Unfortunately, she passed away when I was only eleven years old and now, I try to live as a confident, strong woman in honor of her memory. Because of her passing, I was forced to look elsewhere for strong female role models from a young age. My dad is an amazing “dad-mom” (our special word for his role), but there are many things with which he simply cannot and could not empathize, particularly in regard to the life experiences of a young girl.

Because I only have memories of my mother and my perception of how she would react to things, I have often turned to female characters of all kinds to supplement this loss. I am an avid reader and have always loved movies, so I, like many other people of my generation, usually turn to books and films for womanly inspiration. Having such a strong mother, I think I have always considered myself a feminist, even before really understanding the concept. Girl power was so ingrained in me that I have always been quick to call out double standards and I cannot remember ever feeling that I had less potential because of my sex. Realizing that the seemingly inherent empowerment I experience is not the prevailing norm for other women has only increased my passion to be vocal about equality and equity of the sexes.

Recently, when I have felt that I needed a female role model and didn't have my mom to turn to, I have also realized that I am not alone. We *all* call on figures more powerful than ourselves when we feel at a loss. But who is it that we turn to when we feel so lost? Each other, absolutely – but how about when all of us are feeling the same way? It is in these situations when we need our role models: those figures who did it, who got through something that seemed so gargantuan that no one could possibly survive it. Our role models validate our experience. When we see something on a page or on screen that we can empathize with, we no longer feel as if we are alone. Finally, someone else says aloud that they are experiencing something similar. And like many other American women, the 2016 presidential election was a catalyst for me. Many women in America had a visceral reaction to the outcome of that election and desperately needed someone

to turn to. After Hillary Clinton lost the United States presidency, she said this to the little girls of the world:<sup>7</sup>

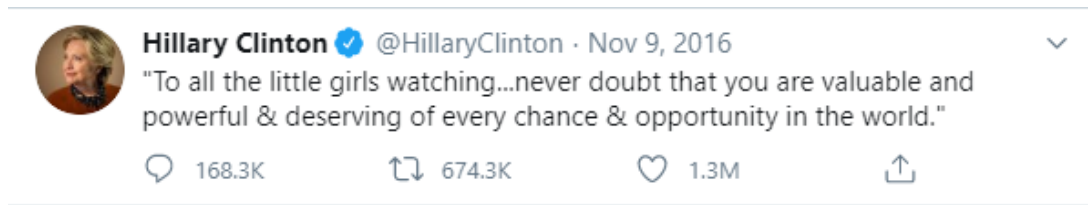


Figure 1: Screenshot of Hillary Clinton tweet from the day she gave her concession speech in 2016.

This statement really stuck with me. Clinton felt the need to address the girls of the world because she knew they were watching, listening, and learning from her as a role model. In reaction to her loss, what would the women of the world need to hear to process what happened? This was a qualified, intelligent, experienced person who was in competition with an individual who had such an obvious lack of knowledge for the job, not to mention a hateful and worrying belief system that was in direct opposition to so many groups of Americans. I was 25 at the time, but I still felt like Clinton was speaking directly to me and the above statement was definitely something I needed to hear. Her defeat felt personal.

On Inauguration Day in 2017, I was devastated. I cried all the way to work; I cried after work. I cried in a movie theater that night when my boyfriend took me to see *La La Land* to get our minds off of everything. I felt completely and utterly helpless. But one of the great things about women and our allies is that we do not take things sitting down.

The very next day following the inauguration, people stood up and marched in Washington, DC and in sister marches around the world, protesting the election of the

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7. Hillary Clinton (@HillaryClinton), "To all the little girls watching...never doubt that you are valuable and powerful & deserving of every chance & opportunity in the world", Twitter, November 9, 2016, <https://twitter.com/hillaryclinton/status/796394920051441664?lang=en>.

newly inaugurated president and exactly what his election would mean for women.<sup>8</sup> In a time of fear, oppressors win by making people believe that they are alone in their feelings and beliefs. Marches (for all sorts of causes, not only women's rights) demonstrate how impossible it is that we are alone in our feelings. People were angry and fearful after the election and the marches were a direct way to show the entire world that we have power in numbers. It is shocking to think that one individual could spark this much pain, fear, and anger in the hearts of people across the globe, but he did. This idea is upsetting until the realization comes that just as one rude, misinformed man made the world react, one strong, intelligent woman—armed with knowledge and hope, with an army of other wonderful women and allies behind her—would be able to do the same. Women realized the threat that this person represented to their rights and acted.

Seeing images of familiar fictional characters as well as powerful historical women on protest signs gave me hope, not only because of the extraordinary number of people who gathered, but also because of the iconic women pictured on the signs. In times like these, we need images of individuals that we perceive to be greater than ourselves to move us forward. In instances when individuals find themselves unable to cope or understand what to do next, it is natural to look toward extraordinary examples: others who have succeeded in defending their own causes against insurmountable odds. They are our role models.

Wonder Woman, Princess Leia, and Hermione Granger are particularly great examples to engage at protests because they are so widely known. Their notoriety allows more people to connect directly with the protestors' message because people understand

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8. Women's March.



what they represent. Because of the visibility these three female characters have within the realm of worldwide culture, their call for equality feels relevant to women and their allies across the globe. These three characters were raised as beacons of hope to demonstrate the power of women everywhere. Wonder Woman, Leia, and Hermione represent power, strength, and heart. They are by no means the same woman, yet I believe they bring about a similar feeling within us. These three characters were featured on these signs because we know them well enough to be sure that they would have stood right there next to us, angry and impassioned. Because of the belief that we have in these characters, it seems as if they would turn around and believe in us, too. Because we feel we know them, we think they would encourage us to do the unthinkable and the seemingly impossible. It is in this spirit that we called upon the likes of Wonder Woman, General Leia Organa, and Hermione Granger to be symbols of hope on protest signs that day. But why these three characters in particular? What about them is emblematic of the women's rights movement? What do these characters, in this context, do for today's feminists? Put simply, Wonder Woman blazed the feminist pop culture trail, Princess Leia revitalized it, and Hermione brought it to a younger generation, so that all of us could have role models to help us as we move onward and upward.

## Chapter One

### Wonder Woman: Diana, Princess of Themiscyra

Besides friends and family, the first role models that people may encounter in life are characters they read about as young children. Superheroes fill a decent portion of that role model space for many girls and boys alike. However, the comic world has traditionally been a boys' club. Yet, in a cultural and comic book world inundated by male figures, Wonder Woman has been a representative force for the power and agency of women since her creation in 1941. "That she exists at all is a literary miracle, all the more so due to her time and place of creation. A character who burst onto the scene at the end of 1941, she embodied feminism and inherently progressive values."<sup>9</sup> This powerful female figure still symbolizes strength to a global population of women who are trying to make sense of the world on their own terms. Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are redefining the roles we can play in society and many are inclined to look to popular culture for role models.

Wonder Woman's renewal in popularity and her appearance on many Women's March protest signs encourages the consideration of the cultural, political, and social climate when she was first presented as a comic book character. Why did Wonder Woman reappear at that particular time in history? What was going on in the world that gave rise to her creation, especially since the majority of superheroes at the time were male? What spurred her return in 2017? Wonder Woman has come back into popular culture because the kind of female figure who was needed in 1941 is the same kind who

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9. Landry Q. Walker, *Wonder Woman: The Ultimate Guide to the Amazon Warrior*. (New York: DK Publishing, 2017), 7.

is needed today. As comic book author Landry Walker states in his guide to all things Wonder Woman, “where so many other Super Heroes have retained their core intent, to deliver action and thrills, Diana has as well, but with a grander social purpose. If we look to our heroes as icons to emulate, it is Wonder Woman who has most fully embraced that office. She inspires us to be better than we are, not solely to ourselves, but to one another.”<sup>10</sup> It is in this spirit that Wonder Woman’s character was created.

Dr. William Moulton Marston, a noted American psychologist, was the creative mind behind Wonder Woman. As to the root of her creation, Marston once said, “not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Women’s strong qualities have become despised because of their weak ones. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.”<sup>11</sup> Wonder Woman was greatly inspired by two influential women in Marston’s life, Elizabeth Holloway and Olive Byrne, Elizabeth being his wife and Olive his partner. Marston kept his rather unconventional family life hidden from the public eye, but it greatly influenced his career and works.

Marston was a great proponent for women’s rights. “Marston initially created the character to teach readers – especially boys and men – that women are capable.”<sup>12</sup> This was a time when women, including Olive Byrne and Elizabeth Holloway Marston, were banding together in the fight to have equal rights with men. These progressive women expected “political equality with men. They expected to control their fertility, to forge

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10. Walker, *The Ultimate Guide*, 7.

11. Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Vintage, 2015), 187.

12. Mara Wood, “Feminist Psychology: Teaching How to Be Wonderful,” in *Wonder Woman Psychology: Lassoing the Truth*, ed. Travis Langley and Mara Wood, (New York: Sterling, 2017), 177.

relationships of equality with the men they married, if they chose to marry, and to rise to the top of their professions, whether or not they also chose to have children.”<sup>13</sup> This expectation of equality was also noticeable in Marston’s depiction of Wonder Woman. She was not Superman’s sidekick; instead, she fought alongside him. Marston’s Wonder Woman had her own story to tell and forged her own path. Through his Wonder Woman comics, Marston hoped to demonstrate the great power that women have, to use the stories to awaken the power that already existed within women and illuminate that power to those who might not realize it existed. “Marston deeply believed in women’s potential in general—and more specifically, in Wonder Woman’s ability to tap it.”<sup>14</sup>

Not long after Wonder Woman’s first comics, she “was presented along with notable women in an additional feature of the Wonder Woman comics called ‘Wonder Women of History.’”<sup>15</sup> Some of the notable women described in these profiles included Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, Sojourner Truth, Abigail Adams, Sacagawea, and Amelia Earhart.<sup>16</sup> The inclusion of these women as a supplement to the Wonder Woman comics lauded their real-life accomplishments as super heroic. Rather than saying that Wonder Woman’s powers were unattainable, by connecting this superhero directly to real world women doing amazing things, being a Wonder Woman seemed possible for everyone. With this, these women, no matter if they were real or fictional, could be held up as examples for others to follow, role models lauded for their intelligence, strength, and heart.

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13. Lepore, *Secret History*, 21.

14. Andi Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 77-8.

15. Lepore, *Secret History*, 221.

16. Lepore, *Secret History*, 222.

Despite the incredible success of the original iterations of the character, after Marston died in 1947, the character of Wonder Woman changed greatly. Though she was always published, Wonder Woman during the 1950s did not carry the might or the power she began with. Instead of being Wonder Woman, she appeared mostly as her alter ego, Diana Prince. Rather than fighting alongside Superman, multiple men were wooing her and Diana was contemplating whether to hang up her lasso and settle down.<sup>17</sup> But then during the 1970s and '80s, “women’s history exploded: brilliant, passionate scholars studied everything from the shape of women’s lives to the history of their political struggles.”<sup>18</sup> Gloria Steinem, the prominent journalist and feminist, was notably impressed by the feminism written into Marston’s Wonder Woman comics, but noticed the changes that were made to the character over the years.<sup>19</sup> In the early 1970s, Steinem began preparing the very first full issue of *Ms. Magazine*, which was consequently adorned with a large graphic of the superheroine and the statement “Wonder Woman for President.”<sup>20</sup>

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17. Landry Q. Walker, *Wonder Woman: The Ultimate Guide to the Amazon Warrior*. (New York: DK Publishing, 2017), 70.

18. Lepore, *Secret History*, 293-4.

19. Lepore, *Secret History*, 285.

20. “Ms. Vol 1, No. 1,” Smithsonian Institution, [https://www.si.edu/object/ms-vol-1-no-1:nmah\\_1803345](https://www.si.edu/object/ms-vol-1-no-1:nmah_1803345).

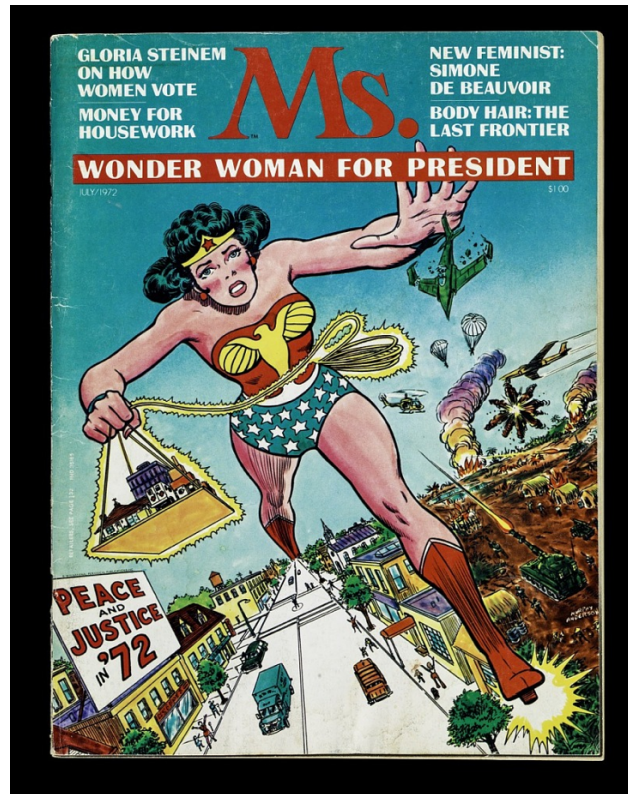


Figure 2: Cover of the first issue of Ms. Magazine.

During her research for the issue, Steinem “saw some of the Diana Prince Era comics and said, ‘What’s happened to Wonder Woman? You’ve taken away all her super-powers. Don’t you realize how important this is to the young women of America?’”<sup>21</sup>

Steinem noticed that during the post-Marston, Diana Prince years of the comic, Wonder Woman lost her agency and spark. Steinem understood the connection that women had with Wonder Woman and could not abide how much the character had changed.

Unsurprisingly, this initial issue of the magazine had great influence upon Wonder Woman as well. “The magazine includes an essay concerning Wonder Woman’s history and role in inspiring feminism. Due in part to these efforts, Wonder Woman’s powers

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21. Lepore, *Secret History*, 287.

were soon restored within the comics.”<sup>22</sup> Along with the Wonder Woman comics, it was understood that *Ms.* magazine was also a great starting point for women to discover feminism and to feel less alone in questioning their place in the world. “*Ms.* would quickly start sneaking feminism into the living rooms and doctor’s offices of women who never knew they were in need of it.”<sup>23</sup> Steinem harnessed the power of Wonder Woman to get “everyday” women to understand how important they were and the kind of power they had.

So, not coincidentally, it seems that when women’s voices are being amplified, Wonder Woman is often called upon to help. “Wonder Woman was a product of the suffragist, feminist, and birth control movements of the 1900s and 1910s and became a source of the women’s liberation and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>24</sup> She was created “to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations and professions monopolized by men.”<sup>25</sup> Though she possessed superpowers, Wonder Woman was still meant to be an everywoman, an example to others that demonstrated the agency and potential that women have.<sup>26</sup> With Diana being a demigod and superhero, it might seem difficult to empathize with her from the outset. However, she does face obstacles similar to those which we mere mortals face. In addition to fighting

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22. “*Ms.* Vol 1, No. 1.”

23. Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture*, 65-6.

24. Lepore, *Secret History*, 296.

25. Lepore, *Secret History*, 220.

26. Lepore, *Secret History*, 220.

her own brother (who just so happens to be the God of War), Diana faces self-doubt, family rifts, inner conflict, and loss of love. Her constant belief in people and persistence to help the world as best she can inspire others to do the same in the face of enemies that seem nearly impossible to defeat.

Despite the great power that Wonder Woman possesses to motivate and inspire others, not everyone agrees about her status as a feminist role model. Much of the scholarship surrounding Wonder Woman relates to whether her character really should be considered a feminist symbol. As such, Wonder Woman has had a problematic relationship with feminism over the years, especially considering how much feminism itself has changed. Marston insisted that his creation of Wonder Woman was for the betterment of women and female representation in comics, but some disagree. The nature of Wonder Woman's outfit is sometimes the reason for their doubt. In the preface to a recent Wonder Woman graphic novel, Brian Vaughn says, "I think Wonder Woman is so hard to write because she's so full of contradictions. A warrior who loves peace? A champion for women's dignity who runs around in star-studded little blue underpants?"<sup>27</sup> His first complaint is easy to address – Wonder Woman does love peace, but she knows that she will be called upon to defend it and must be ready and trained to do so. As to his second point, her choice of garment allows her the flexibility and range of movement to jump, flip, fly, and save the world. It is in this spirit that I think Wonder Woman is a perfect feminist for today. Her outfit is her choice and does not reduce the respect or honor she deserves. Wonder Woman may be presented in a skirt and bustier

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27. Allan Heinberg, Terry Dodson, and Rachel Dodson, *Who is Wonder Woman?* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2017).



or even in a stunning gown with her sword concealed against her back, but that further proves that all people should have the choice to present themselves as they wish.<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Julie O'Reilly, a scholar of American culture, believes that "the depiction of female superheroes as both strong and beautiful underscores the binary of the masculine-subject/feminine object relationship."<sup>29</sup> To counter this, Gal Gadot, the current actor portraying Wonder Woman said, "I think as a feminist, you should be able to wear whatever you like! In any case, there is such a misunderstanding of the concept. Feminism is about equality and choice and freedom. And the writers, Patty and myself all figured that the best way to show that is to show Diana as having no awareness of social roles. She has no gender boundaries. To her, everyone is equal."<sup>30</sup> In this equality, there is not even an acknowledgement of that potential power struggle. Wonder Woman knows that she is equal to all other people and does not even consider the fact that someone might think otherwise. I agree that this was the perfect way to portray the character. If Wonder Woman can present herself as she wishes and not waste a thought on the opinions of others, why shouldn't every other woman do the same?

Additional criticism has come from feminists of the mid-1970s who believed that "Wonder Woman was a symbol of the ruination of feminism."<sup>31</sup> They questioned why Wonder Woman was forced to work for her status as a superhero if she was truly

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28. "Chapter 9." *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins (2017; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017), DVD.

29. Julie D. O'Reilly, "The Wonder Woman Precedent: Female (Super)Heroism on Trial," *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 3 (2005): 280.

30. Roslyn Sulcas, "Can Gal Gadot Make Wonder Woman a Hero for Our Time?" *The New York Times*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/movies/wonder-woman-dc-comics-gal-gadot.html>.

31. Lepore, *Secret History*, 291.

equal to the male superheroes of her time. Wonder Woman had to “compete in and win a series of physical challenges” to be considered worthy to defend others and fight, yet Superman “becomes a hero simply because he chooses to be. Clark Kent decides to don a cape and enforce justice – a decision that is neither questioned nor challenged.”<sup>32</sup> Though this is a valid point, it could be argued that because Wonder Woman fought for her status as a hero, her place there was well earned and should be even more respected. She was equal to, if not better than, her male counterparts and should not have had to fight for her status, but she did anyway. The journey that her character took to reach hero status is representative of the fight that all women have continually had to undertake in order to be considered on the same level as men.

Fast-forward to 2017 when a new Wonder Woman movie came out and Wonder Woman was still breaking down barriers for women. She was finally on the big screen in her own DC superhero movie. It should not have been groundbreaking for a woman to be the title character of a superhero film, but it was. When it comes to representations of power in America, there is a certain fixation on the office of the President of the United States. Trina Robbins posits, “although we were taught in school that anyone born in America could become president of our country, it was universally accepted without question that only *men* born in America could be president.”<sup>33</sup> However, “Marston wanted the kids who read his comics to imagine a woman as president of the United States.”<sup>34</sup> No matter what the outcome of the 2016 American Presidential election was,

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32. O'Reilly, “The Wonder Woman Precedent,” 273.

33. Trina Robbins, foreword to *Wonder Woman Psychology: Lassoing the Truth*, ed. Travis Langley and Mara Wood, (New York: Sterling, 2017) xv.

34. Lepore, *Secret History*, 228.

Wonder Woman was prepared. If the first female president was elected, Wonder Woman would celebrate the great advances that American women have made, but also emphasize that there was still a long road ahead to full equality. However, because of the election's outcome, she became a heroic manifestation of the need to carry on and keep fighting for women's rights and human rights in general. Wonder Woman now rallies the embattled and broken to pick their shields back up and move forward.

"Wonder Woman began in a protest march, a bedroom, and a birth control clinic."<sup>35</sup> And so, on the same battlegrounds upon which Wonder Woman started is where she began her comeback. Today, Wonder Woman has been revitalized as an updated version of her former self. She is, once again, an activist who fights for women, truth, justice, and love of all kinds. She inspires activism in others as well. Wonder Woman says, "I believe in love... I know there are many who think that is foolish, but I truly do believe in it. I believe we should be allowed to love one another, and to do so without restraint. I believe that love is not limited, but limitless."<sup>36</sup> Her championing of love as a limitless concept reflects all of the different types of love that can be seen around the world today.

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35. Lepore, *Secret History*, xiv.

36. Greg Rucka, Liam Sharp, and Laura Martin. *Wonder Woman: The Lies, Volume 1* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2017).



Figure 3: Protest Sign depicting Wonder Woman punching the 45<sup>th</sup> president in the face which is also a direct reference to Captain America punching Adolf Hitler. See figure list for Captain America graphic.

On her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, Hillary Rodham Clinton received the Wonder Woman Award from the Women's Media Center. In her acceptance speech, Clinton said of the new Wonder Woman film, "this is about more than just making better or representative movies, it's about the need for better representation of women in all walks of life. You cannot be what you cannot see."<sup>37</sup> Quite a few of today's Wonder Woman publications are children's books. Children, like adults, need to feel empowered and learn from a young age that gender and sex do not dictate whether one can be a superhero. No matter the medium, the message spread by Wonder Woman is that of hope and positivity. Strong women figures need to be in the public eye for the betterment of the world. Equal opportunities for representation might begin in pop culture but result in real life

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37. Benjamin Lindsay, "Read Hillary Clinton's Full Speech Accepting the Wonder Woman Award," *Vanity Fair*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/10/hillary-clinton-wonder-woman-award>.

benefits for women worldwide. The inclusion of women's voices in the global conversation is vital and Wonder Woman is a figure that can help. Heroes like Wonder Woman expose the inherent goodness and love within people during a time when that might not be so obvious. She serves as a role model of strength, but also hope and most importantly, love—of oneself and others. When women and their feminist allies wield protest signs of this iconic character, they show the world that they are ready and that they believe in the inherent power and agency of women.



Figure 4: Woman in Pussy Hat at Women's March Holds Sign of Wonder Woman depicted as the Statue of Liberty

During the period of revitalization in the feminist movement during the 1970s and '80s, a certain spunky space princess found her way into our hearts and consequently onto our protest signs, as well.

## Chapter Two

### Princess *and* General Leia Organa

In 1977, a fantasy flick in the form of a space opera premiered, aptly titled *Star Wars*. This film was released right in the middle of the second wave of feminism, which “was all about full equality: equal rights in the workforce, sexual liberation (and access to contraception and abortion) and freedom from intimidation and violence.”<sup>38</sup> The 1970s brought about this new wave of feminism and along with it, new attitudes about the power of women. Dr. Diana Dominguez, a scholar of gender issues in pop culture recalls, “teenagers like me in the late 1970s were the first group of girls on the verge of womanhood who could hear their parents say, ‘you can be anything you want,’ and have it be true. The problem was we had few visible role models to follow into that wide ‘anything’ world.”<sup>39</sup> Enter Princess Leia Organa.

Leia and the actor who portrayed her have continually been in the global conversation of women’s rights and roles since Leia appeared onscreen in the late 70s, symbolizing the power women could wield, not only in space, but on Earth as well. “In the original trilogy, Leia’s character served as a spunky, no-holds-barred role model for an emerging generation of young women trying to break into still overwhelmingly male-dominated work places and social/political arenas—an exemplar to follow, a woman

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38. Claire Horn, “A Short History of Feminist Theory,” in *Feminists Don’t Wear Pink (and Other Lies): Amazing Women on What the F-Word Means to Them*, ed. Scarlett Curtis, (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 335.

39. Diana Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force: Empowerment and Disillusionment in a Galaxy Far, Far Away,” in *Culture, Identities, and Technology in the Star Wars Films: Essays on the Two Trilogies*, ed. Carl Silvio and Tony M. Vince, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 129.

who strove and learned to ‘have it all’ as so many women did in the late 1970s and early 1980s.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, Leia has been described by recent scholars as:

the first feminist action hero of a new generation that came to feature outspoken and physically capable characters such as Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor. This characterization is undoubtedly owed in large part to Carrie Fisher, herself an outspoken feminist, who remained vocal about her role as Leia – and the sexism levelled at her and her character – until her death in 2016.<sup>41</sup>

As an example to those women who were trying to break into their new roles, Leia faced similar difficulties while finding her way forward in her influential role as a leader of a rebellion. Despite being the only character mentioned by name in the opening title crawl of *New Hope*, the *Star Wars* princess does not get very much screen time. It takes 40 minutes to see her on screen again after her initial appearance. Fisher’s description of the *Star Wars* movie set attests that it was just as male-dominated as her space adventure was. She was one of very few women associated with the first films. During the making of the films, she found community and comfort in the makeup chair with her makeup artist, Kay Freeborn. “Kay was largely in charge of my makeup, of course, seeing as we were both women – and in an all-male space-fantasy world, we women had to stick together.”<sup>42</sup> In addition to Kay, Fisher found a friend in her stylist, Pat McDermott. With the help of these two women, Fisher became Princess Leia. Fisher remembers, “I would invariably fall asleep in the makeup chair, a plain girl with damp scraggly hair... and would miraculously awaken two hours later transformed from ‘Who the hell is she?’ into the magnificently mighty mouthful herself, Princess Leia Organa,

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40. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 111.

41. de Bruin-Mole, “Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses,” 238.

42. Carrie Fisher, *The Princess Diarist* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016), 46.

formerly of Alderaan and presently of anywhere and everywhere she damn well pleased.”<sup>43</sup> This transformation is obviously more than physical. One moment Carrie Fisher feels like a nobody and the next she is a powerful princess who answers to no one.

Again, as only one of the very few women onscreen in the original trilogy, Carrie Fisher, and thus Princess Leia, was continually conscious and cognizant of the significance of that. To this point, Fisher remarks, "I could pretend I was a princess whose life went from chaos to crisis without looking down between chaoses to find, to her relief, that her dress wasn't torn.”<sup>44</sup> Carrie was worried about appearances, and so perhaps Leia would have been, too – or at least conscious of it enough to humanize her. Carrie Fisher thinking about Leia in this way suggests that she also utilized Leia’s character to bolster her own confidence. Carrie gave Leia life, but Leia gave Carrie the confidence to do so. She emulated the princess she was playing to bring about her desired result. Fisher's self-consciousness only peeked through when checking her dress, which seems an understandable check when you are the only woman on set.

Being the only woman in this type of film might have traditionally meant that Leia would fit the “damsel in distress” type of princess, but that could not be further from the truth. Leia was not a “typical” princess by any definition of the word and subverted all expectations of being one. Though she wears a flowy white gown, has glossy lips, and bears the title of royalty, "she carries a blaster and can shoot with deadly accuracy.”<sup>45</sup> In what is generically deemed her “rescue scene,” Leia wakes up on her own

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43. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 37-8.

44. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 26-7.

45. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 116.



(no kiss required)<sup>46</sup> and immediately questions her would-be savior by saying, “Aren’t you a little short for a storm trooper?”<sup>47</sup> In Leia and Luke’s first interaction, “George Lucas instantly shatters the familiar fairy tale trope of the fair unknown knight or prince in shining armor who comes to save the silent but eternally grateful damsel in distress and whisk her off to safety and a life of happily ever after.”<sup>48</sup> Leia is not thinking of happily ever after; she is thinking of the rebellion and her next move. When she speaks, her indignance signifies that not only does she not need help, but that she isn’t sure if Luke can provide the help he promises.

Leia is the first representation of the rebellion that the audience sees, and she symbolizes it far more than Luke or Han. Leia is “a full-out rebel: outspoken, unapologetic, sarcastic, even bossy, and, shooting and killing without hesitation with the same skill as all the tough guys around her.”<sup>49</sup> Leia is not just a symbolic leader either; she understands how their enemy (the Empire) works and uses that to figure out their next steps. For example, in *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Leia knows that their escape attempt was only successful because the Empire wanted them to get away.<sup>50</sup>

One of the most iconic Leia scenes from the entire saga is the infamous metal bikini scene during *Return of the Jedi* in which Leia kills her captor, Jabba the Hutt.<sup>51</sup> Many would argue that this scene’s only function is to objectify and sexualize the only

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46. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 109.

47. “Chapter 32: Rescuing the Princess.” *Star Wars: A New Hope*, directed by George Lucas (1977; Beverly Hills, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2015), Blu-ray.

48. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 109-10.

49. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 113.

50. Lucas, *A New Hope*, “Chapter 40: They Let Us Go.”

51. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 117.

female character in the trilogy, but I agree with Dominguez that instead, “it can be read as a moment of great empowerment for the females in the audience.”<sup>52</sup> Rather than having another character kill Jabba so that they can save Leia, Leia saves herself. “Leia used the very chains that bound her to strangle the gangster to death – that’s the image we should take away from this scene; not some bikini, but the fact that she *literally* used the methods of her oppressors to kill them.”<sup>53</sup>

When speaking about the Jabba scene in her book, Fisher maintains, “the women forgive me for being in the metal bikini because they know I’m not in it voluntarily, and they let the men like it – even have their fairly innocuous little erections – because they know that I represent something else and not just that sex thing. Capable, reliable, equal to if not better than a man.”<sup>54</sup> Fisher understood the power of that scene. Yes, it would titillate men, but it would also empower women to be their own advocates and stand up against their would-be oppressors. Fisher said that her killing Jabba the Hutt in that metal bikini was her favorite moment in her personal film history.<sup>55</sup> She did get to kill the villain, which was no small feat, but she had to do it wearing a metal bikini. She was not worried about killing Jabba, but she was worried about fitting into her costume. Fisher herself makes a point of mentioning that she was originally given the part of Princess Leia with the caveat that she would lose ten pounds.<sup>56</sup> With that always in the back of her mind, it is unsurprising that instead of worrying about killing her captor,

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52. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 117.

53. Nigel Mitchell, “Princess Leia: 15 Reasons She Was the Best Part of Star Wars,” CBR, December 30, 2016, <https://www.cbr.com/princess-leia-the-best-part-of-star-wars>.

54. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 230.

55. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 39.

56. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 34.

she would be worried about her appearance in the scene. So, it was not doubt in her own skills, but instead, doubt in how she would be seen by the movie-going public and by the filmmakers. This kind of doubt mirrors the uncertainty that women face in daily life – having to have to worry about their appearance in order to be taken seriously, even if they know they have the skills necessary to do a job or complete a task. Realizing that even heroes face hurdles such as this humanizes Leia, but also highlights her strength.

Over the course of the films, Leia demonstrates her power in many different ways. She has a strong Force connection and frequently feels disturbances, not least of all when her son Ben commits patricide and kills Han Solo.<sup>57</sup> Princess Leia trained as a Jedi Knight like Luke did, but did not fully complete her training because she foresaw the consequences her family would face as a result.<sup>58</sup> She specifically sensed that her son would die at the end of her Jedi path.<sup>59</sup> Leia obviously cares the most about the survival of the resistance, but sacrifices her opportunity to be a Jedi to protect her family and maintain her current place in the rebellion. With this, it is evident that Leia's actions within the *Star Wars* films demonstrate her strength, but also her vulnerability and humanity. She is strong, but realizes her limitations. She leads, but allows others to have input in the rebellion's plans. By *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Leia has become a general.<sup>60</sup> Though (spoiler alert) she ends up dying, it is evident that her influence lives on in Rey and in her own son, for whom she seemingly sacrifices herself. The characters

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57. "Chapter 43: Father and Son." *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, directed by J. J. Abrams (2015; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2016), Blu-ray.

58. "Chapter 31: The Destiny of a Jedi." *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, directed by J.J. Abrams (2019; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2020), Blu-ray.

59. Abrams, *The Rise of Skywalker*, "Chapter 31: The Destiny of a Jedi."

60. Abrams, *The Force Awakens*, "Chapter 34: Reunion."

seem to acknowledge that everything happened because of Leia—she is the rebellion and she is the Force that makes everything succeed.

Carrie Fisher's own feelings towards Leia are incredibly telling:

But as it happens I've spent the lion's share of my life...being as much myself as Princess Leia. Answering questions about her, defending her, fed up with being mistaken for her, overshadowed by her, struggling with my resentment of her, making her my own, finding myself, keeping company with her, loving her...wishing she'd finally just go away and leave me to be myself alone, but then wondering who I'd be without her, finding out how proud I am of her, making sure I'm careful to not do anything that might reflect badly on her or that she might disapprove of, feeling honored to be her representative here on earth, her caretaker, doing my best to represent her, trying to understand how she might feel, doing what I can to be worthy of the gig, and then feeling beyond ridiculous and wishing that it would just fade away, leaving me to be who I was all those years ago.<sup>61</sup>

Fisher weaponized Leia against her own insecurities and strove to make Leia proud. Just like the fans, Carrie Fisher used Leia to motivate herself to do what she thought she could not, to be more than she thought she was. Even for the woman who portrayed her, Princess Leia was an ideal, a role model—timeless because she exists outside of time, immortalized in film. Thus, Leia is a fantastic role model for those within her own universe and those fans who can only follow her exploits onscreen.

When evaluated as a character independent of the movies, Leia is the leader of a rebellion who was born into an incredibly powerful family and was subsequently raised by a different powerful family. She is strong, independent, loving, intelligent, stubborn, and compelling. Leia was truly limited by Lucas's telling of her. He wrote her as a feisty character, but she was barely given the space within the plot to do anything with her spunk. During the commentary over *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, Fisher discusses the fact that her entire emotional journey was passed over in exchange for encouragement

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61. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 243-4.

for Luke.<sup>62</sup> Most of her life is not shown on screen, even when the audience knows what happened to her: childbirth, a relationship with Han, raising their son, Ben. However, once fans and academics get her off the screen and onto a protest sign or into an academic publication, her status as an icon can be more fully realized. She is simply too important and influential to be limited to her characterization in the original trilogy of the *Star Wars* saga. Carrie Fisher herself states, “I knew who she was to the women.”<sup>63</sup> She had no idea just how true this statement would become.

After Carrie Fisher’s passing, there was a great deal of mourning which turned into motivation. “Fisher’s death on December 27, 2016 closely followed the contentious election of Donald Trump and her name and likeness as Leia became a rallying cry among women in the subsequent months.”<sup>64</sup> This becomes apparent when looking through the sea of incredible protest signs of the Women’s March. “Posters of Princess Leia received substantial media coverage during the event, and one particularly popular sign, designed by Hayley Gilmore, read: ‘A Woman’s Place is in the Resistance.’”<sup>65</sup> This particular protest sign was the inspiration for the title of this paper:

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62. Commentary on “Chapter 27: Brother and Sister.” *Star War: Return of the Jedi*, directed by Richard Marquand (1983; Beverly Hills, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2015), Blu-ray.

63. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 227.

64. de Bruin-Mole, “Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses,” 238-9.

65. de Bruin-Mole, “Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses,” 239.



Figure 5: Hayley Gilmore's now famous protest sign, which influenced the title of this work.

Images created by marchers “situated the Trump administration within the *Star Wars* universe as an evil, anti-feminist force to be vanquished, and Leia as a feminist role model leading the vanguard.”<sup>66</sup> By utilizing Leia as a “taliswoman” against this evil entity, fans demonstrated Leia’s power as a symbol.



Figure 6: Sign saying “Carrie Fisher Sent Me” at the Women’s March in Detroit, referencing Fisher’s passing.

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66. de Bruin-Mole, “Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses,” 239.



Figure 7: Women's March protest sign featuring a photo of Carrie Fisher giving the middle finger, which says "Fempire Strikes Back" with "fempire" in rainbow colors.

Fans have the power to take the character off the screen and page. Once that happens, the character becomes theirs. George Lucas had enough raw material within this feisty princess to move proverbial mountains but did not really focus on her story. To fans, Leia's "position as a lone woman among men became a positive point of identification rather than a negative example of Hollywood gender inequality. Like themselves or like women they knew, Leia had faced numerous struggles and injustices in a patriarchal society, but nevertheless persisted. In this sense, Star Wars is made feminist by the fans... even when the franchise's own message is ambiguous and often confusing."<sup>67</sup>

Over the course of the original trilogy, not to mention the sequel trilogy, Leia had a lot to deal with—her entire planet being destroyed while trying to lead the rebellion, having confusing and distracting feelings about Han, and then finding out that Luke is her brother and Darth Vader is her father. And yet, barely any of her journey is depicted on screen; the process of her trying to figure all of this out is simply not shown. Yet, her

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67. de Bruin-Mole, "Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses," 240.

power is still obvious. This is evidenced by the fact that she becomes a general in the sequel films and remains the main motivator and heart of the resistance, no matter what shape it takes. Everyone looks to Leia for hope and guidance as a leader, but also specifically as a powerful woman. “Here was a woman who could play *like* and *with* the boys, but who didn’t have to *become* one of the boys and who could, if and when she wanted to, show she liked the boys, a woman who is outspoken, unashamed, and, most importantly, unpunished for being so.”<sup>68</sup>

“What would Leia do?”<sup>69</sup> Well, her longtime friend and on-screen brother, actor Mark Hamill would say the following:<sup>70</sup>



Figure 8: A tweet from *Star Wars* actor Mark Hamill on the day of the first Women’s March in 2017.

68. Dominguez, “Feminism and the Force,” 115-6.

69. Fisher, *The Princess Diarist*, 84.

70. Mark Hamill (@HamillHimself), “I know where she stood. You know where she stood. Such an honor to see her standing with you today. Bigly. #Resistance #WorldWideWomensMarch”, Twitter, January 17, 2017, 5:46pm, <https://twitter.com/HamillHimself/status/822938477989769217>.



Like Mark Hamill, I believe that Carrie Fisher would have been incredibly proud to have her image held aloft at a protest against the 45<sup>th</sup> president, especially one aimed directly at the protection of women's rights. "Fisher brought her own spark, her own bravery, and her own strength into the role of Leia Organa. Fisher was just as much of a fighter as Princess Leia, battling her own demons throughout her life. And just like Princess Leia, Fisher used her battle to do good for others as an activist for mental health, among other things."<sup>71</sup> It is also important to note here that it wasn't just Leia who was seen on Women's March signs; Carrie Fisher, herself was featured just as often as she was shown in her Princess Leia garb. To me, this means that people believe Leia and Fisher were one and the same, part of a shared message and meaning.

Overall as a role model, Leia "transcends all of the stereotypes and archetypes: she is a princess, but not a damsel in distress; she is a warrior, but does not live solely by the sword or gun; she is a sister and, eventually a wife and mother, but she never stops being a rebel; and, she exemplifies both traditional and feminist qualities of the hero, fighting dragons (or storm troopers) bravely and treating others equally."<sup>72</sup> This is exactly the kind of strong, empowered woman who can shine as an example for future generations. Leia balances her spunk with a powerful, regal air that automatically demonstrates her position as princess and general. She is absolutely vital to the success of the rebellion and the larger story. Without Leia, there is no resistance. Women put her on their signs because they must have been wondering, how could we possibly have

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71. Kendall Ashley, "Carrie Fisher and the Amazing Role Model of Leia Organa," Nerdist, December 27, 2016, <https://nerdist.com/article/carrie-fisher-and-the-amazing-role-model-of-leia-organa>.

72. Dominguez, "Feminism and the Force," 120.

a resistance against an evil tyrant – either “a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away” or in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America – *without* Princess Leia?

## Chapter Three

### Hermione Granger, the Brightest Witch of Her Age

Just like our '70s space warrior from the previous chapter, the third and final heroine role model leads with intelligence, love, and forethought in defense of a cause larger than herself. The late '90s brought along a new wave of feminism and also the beginning of an epic series about a trio of magical friends that captured the world's attention. It is at this point in time that we encounter our final feminist pop culture icon, Hermione Granger.

Hermione came on the scene during the third wave of feminism, which “advocated for the women of various sexual orientations, classes, ethnicities and races. It shifted focus from an attempt to define a united, single entity of ‘woman’ to identifying the diverse circumstances and conditions of ‘women.’”<sup>73</sup> Thus, the *Harry Potter* series was released during a time when feminism was just beginning to grasp the importance of intersectionality and also starting to understand that women's experiences of the world can vary greatly. “The third wave insisted that there was no universal experience of womanhood, and pushed for inclusivity and attention to difference.”<sup>74</sup> This level of inclusivity and appreciation of differences turned out to be instrumental in the upbringing of the young minds that would mature while reading the *Harry Potter* series.

The children who would have grown up with this series are mostly those born within the Millennial generation (born between 1982-1992 or 2002, depending on the

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73. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 3.

74. Horn, “Short History of Feminist Theory,” 346.

source).<sup>75</sup> As I was born in 1991, I am one of those lucky millennials who were the perfect age for reading the series as the books were released. I started reading them right at the time when young witches and wizards would receive their acceptance letters to Hogwarts (the wizarding school from the books) – around ten or eleven. Though I am not a witch and sadly never got to attend a school to become one, reading the *Harry Potter* series was instrumental in my personal development, my politics, and my moral compass. I posit that my generation, influenced by books like the *Harry Potter* series and other forms of pop culture, grew up thinking this kind of third-wave inclusivity was the norm. I certainly experienced this, despite the fact that I grew up in a rural, predominantly conservative area.

Even though these kids in the books could perform magic, they were like my friends and me in most other ways. The characters were all in the process of growing up and learning what they could do in the world. Since the story was told from our peers' point of view, everything they did felt possible and thus by extension, *we* felt empowered by *their* actions. "In place of passive protagonists manipulated by their social, political, and historical contexts, Rowling gives Harry Potter and his peers, and by extension, the readers, agency."<sup>76</sup> When at first we would have felt powerless as kids, this series gave us examples to follow and the motivation to do what was right. My generation saw ourselves in the characters of these books. The strength that the three young protagonists demonstrated in extraordinary situations was incredibly influential

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75. Anthony Gierzynski and Kathryn Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University, 2013), 41.

76. Treza Rosado, "The Generation(s) of Harry Potter: The Boy Wizard and His Young Readers." In *A Wizard of Their Age: Critical Essays from the Harry Potter Generation*, ed. Cecilia Konchar Farr, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 74.

upon our development. As a young girl reading these books, the power that I witnessed these characters exhibiting at such a young age gave me hope that I could change the world, too – or at least help my own little corner of it.

As such, Hermione Granger was one of my generation's first examples of a powerful, intelligent young woman. And as a young girl, she was just like me: an avid reader, book smart, caring, and a little bushy-haired with two big front teeth. I saw myself in her and as she grew, I did, too. By seeing a character such as Hermione in a role like this, young women and men found in her a role model with whom they could personally identify. She is a *normal* girl who just happens to be a witch. She is not the “chosen one” and she does not come from a wizarding family. She is the reader, learning about magic and the socio-political intricacies of the world for the first time right alongside us. Because of this, Hermione is actually a bit of an outsider compared to her peers. Like Harry, she was not raised in the magical world. She is eager to learn all she can about every subject, doing as much research as possible before she arrives at Hogwarts. Though walking into an unfamiliar world might feel scary to anyone, Hermione came armed with knowledge and belief in herself. Because of that belief, “unlike Harry, Hermione does not have to justify or convince herself of her own agency; she has it throughout the series, right from her first appearance on the Hogwarts Express.”<sup>77</sup>

Hermione's aptitude for magic is particularly impressive because her family is not magical. She is a particularly studious and talented witch, able to master difficult spells and pick up concepts quickly, even though some of her peers who do come from magical

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77. William V. Thompson, “From Teenage Witch to Social Activist: Hermione Granger as Female Locus,” in *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts*, ed. Christopher E. Bell, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 187.

families assume her to be inferior – or at least treat her as if she is, even after she demonstrates her abilities. Her great magical skill has led fans of the series to insist that if Hermione were the protagonist of the book, that she would have defeated Voldemort in far less time than her male counterpart.

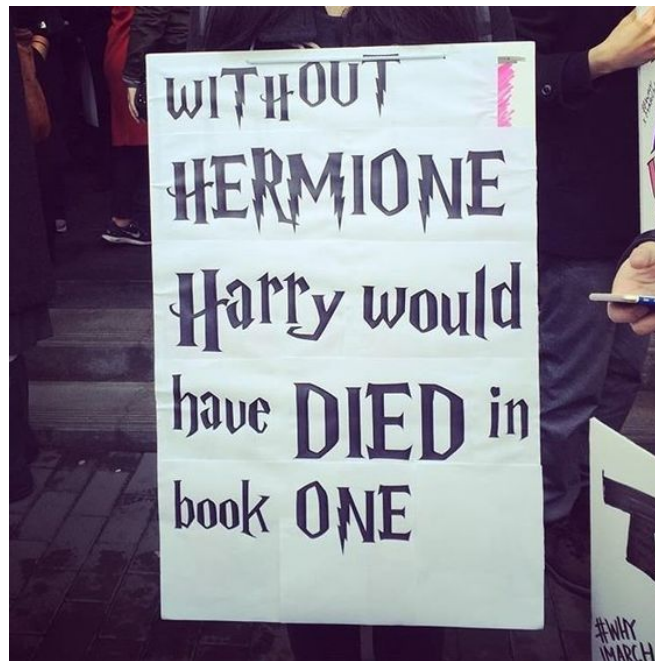


Figure 9: Women's March protest sign stating "Without HERMIONE, Harry would have DIED in book ONE."

As Figure 9 suggests above, readers also believe that Harry would not have been successful at all without Hermione. Suggesting that Harry would not have survived without her makes a more profound statement than it may seem at first glance. As the protagonist, it would be logical to have Harry be the only hero, but he simply does not have all the skills necessary to complete his journey alone. Instead, "it is the Trio as a whole—Harry, Ron and Hermione together – that is the protagonist of the tale, and each member of the Trio is essential, required even, to ultimately succeed... In essence, throughout the series, the Trio functions as a sole entity – a classic trinity protagonist

structure.”<sup>78</sup> So, for her part, Hermione *speaks* for the trio of protagonists; she is the motivator and the brains of the group. “Hermione’s essential characteristic, and her role within the Trio, is to act as the brain; she is the source of logic, knowledge and rational thinking. It is nearly always Hermione who solves the puzzle, spots the clue, provides the insight or answers the question.”<sup>79</sup> These skills make her absolutely vital to the story, and ultimately, the success of their mission to defeat the villain, Lord Voldemort.

In her role as the brains of the trio, Hermione is used to being right, but she is also often underestimated and even humiliated. In the same year, two separate professors call her “an insufferable know-it-all”<sup>80</sup> and “the cleverest witch of [her] age.”<sup>81</sup> Taking these comments in stride, Hermione does not back down from who she is, keeping herself confident, but humble. “Voice is a tool that she capitalizes upon constantly: her voice enables her to answer questions correctly in classes, to master spells quickly, to cajole Harry and Ron into doing homework, to puzzle out clues during various adventures, to advocate for the rights of magical creatures, ad nauseum.”<sup>82</sup> She continues to demonstrate her knowledge in class and in general, no matter what kind of reception she gets. Her tenacity and passion for knowledge, plus her ability to speak up and speak out are motivational for those readers who do not feel their own voices are being heard. “The frequency with which Hermione speaks up for herself and other

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78. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 6.

79. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 6.

80. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 172.

81. Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 346.

82. Sarah Margaret Kniesler, “Alohomora! Unlocking Hermione's Feminism,” in *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts*, ed. Christopher E. Bell, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 90.

‘Others’ during the series does not experience a significant growth since she begins near capacity. Over time, Hermione learns to control her voice so that it is more influential and commanding when utilized.”<sup>83</sup> While the reactions that Hermione received from her peers and professors could have served to silence those who saw themselves in Hermione, seeing her perseverance made readers believe in her to an even greater degree. Personally, Hermione’s tenacity reminded me how important it was to keep voicing my thoughts and opinions. She made me keep questioning things, and perhaps most importantly, she made me keep raising my hand.

Readers are encouraged to side with the heroes since the most “revered characters [in the Harry Potter series] ... are shown to be extremely accepting and open-minded.”<sup>84</sup> This suggests that those characters most readers would want to emulate, assumedly the heroes, would be encouraged to dissent just like their witch/wizard counterparts in the series. In the books, the students take it upon themselves to bring about solutions for the problems the adults are not solving. This gets them in trouble from time to time, which at first scares and frustrates Hermione. Hermione, ever the consummate rule-follower, does eventually change her attitude towards breaking the rules when it comes to helping her friends and saving the wizarding world. She realizes the power that she and her young friends hold can bring about real, quantifiable change. This realization also occurred within the series’ readers.

An extensive study conducted by the University of Vermont found that “Harry Potter fans tend to be more accepting of those who are different, to be more politically tolerant, to be more supportive of equality, to be less authoritarian, to be more opposed

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83. Kniesler, “Unlocking Hermione’s Feminism,” 90.

84. Gierzynski and Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials*, 7.



to the use of violence and torture, to be less cynical, and to evince a higher level of political efficacy.”<sup>85</sup> Based on their findings, they posit that the *Harry Potter* series greatly influenced the political opinions of its readers not only through the events of the story, but the integrity of the characters depicted in the story. “The series hit the Millennial Generation in their politically vulnerable years and engendered deep and widespread interest at an age when selective exposure and the ability to counter-argue are minimal.”<sup>86</sup> Based on their findings, fans of the series were at the perfect age to be exposed to political ideologies and the possibility of their own activism. Fans of the series “were more likely than nonfans to demonstrate a higher level of confidence that they can influence their political world and were more likely to do something to try to change their world, as Harry’s and his friends’ struggles and triumphs demonstrated was possible.”<sup>87</sup> The *Harry Potter* series showed the millennial generation that kids can indeed make a difference, that our voices and opinions mattered and could change things for the better. Hermione and her friends do not take things at face value. They trust only some of the Hogwarts faculty and do not believe that their professors are infallible. They challenge authority, are frequently correct in challenging that authority, and end up saving their world.

Like Wonder Woman and Leia, some scholars have difficulty calling Hermione a feminist character. They find her too mousy, especially at the beginning of the series, and overly subordinate to Harry, and even Ron. What they seem to forget is that she is a young girl at the beginning of this series and to portray her as anything other than an

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85. Gierzynski and Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials*, 6.

86. Gierzynski and Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials*, 39.

87. Gierzynski and Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials*, 79.

eleven-year-old getting thrust into a completely new world would have been disingenuous and hard for readers to empathize with. Like Hermione and Harry, the readers are outsiders being brought into this magical world. Her feminism and personal power just take time to develop. This is evidenced in a passage from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when Hermione expresses some doubt on her path to self-confidence and feminist strength. Hermione says, "Harry - you're a great wizard, you know.' 'I'm not as good as you,' said Harry, very embarrassed as she let go of him. 'Me!' said Hermione. 'Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be *careful!*'"<sup>88</sup> Despite her evident self-doubt in this passage, her aptitude is not what is questioned. Within the same thought, she is also defending Harry against his own self-deprecation. While Hermione's dismissal of her intelligence is upsetting, I think it has more to do with her empathy and understanding of the trial that her friend is about to be put through. In her innocence, this level of self-deprecation just shows that she has things to learn about her own power. Her personal growth is evident and visibly increases with each book in the series.

One way her increasing confidence and feminist power is demonstrated is in the fifth book when Hermione has the idea to start a secret student organization which would help teach its members how to defend themselves from dark wizards who have emerged along with their leader, Lord Voldemort.<sup>89</sup> Actual defensive magic was not being taught to them in their government approved defensive magic class, for fear that there would be an uprising against the British magical governing body. While Harry is

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88. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1998), 287.

89. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2003), 332.

technically the leader of the group, due to his knowledge of defensive spells and his experience fighting dark wizards, Hermione is the one who creates the group. She understands the gap in their education that exists between what they are being taught and the knowledge that they need to survive. This group's "actions in response to the dark threat of the Death Eaters and Voldemort never seem 'childish' to the reader. Their 'adult' responses are particularly significant in a feminist examination of the roles adopted in particular by Hermione through the last three books of the series."<sup>90</sup> In the creation of this group, readers see Hermione interacting with more than just Harry and Ron. She knew that others would need this kind of defensive help and that a larger sense of community could embolden them even further.

"Hermione shrieks, bawls and hides from trolls in [Book One] so that when she stands face to face with Bellatrix LeStrange [SIC] in [Book Seven] and takes the worst torture the second darkest wizard in the world can dish out, it means something."<sup>91</sup>

While I disagree that this power is something she must justify or earn, I agree that her evolution is visible and real to readers, who can then understand how they have made their own journey to maturity along with her from the first to the seventh book.

Hermione's personal growth is evident in the way her confidence is expressed. In book one, we see her energetically raising her hand to answer difficult questions in class and performing new spells with ease, eager to show her knowledge. But by the seventh book, Hermione takes on the darkest wizard of all time with her intelligence and quick

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90. Helen Berents, "Hermione Granger Goes to War," in *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts*, ed. Christopher E. Bell, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 147-8.

91. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 10.

thinking. Her determination in extraordinary scenarios reinforces her status as a feminist role model. She uses her power to help others at all costs.

Because of this passion to help others, Hermione especially fits the third wave of feminism. “Modern-day feminism promotes the theory that only the universal recognition of the prejudices faced by both women and men can perpetuate the equality of the sexes.”<sup>92</sup> Her place in the story also demonstrates and encourages the fact that real feminism is beneficial to men as well. In her relationships with Harry and Ron, she consciously and subconsciously allows them to show more emotion and teaches them empathy. Rowling especially reinforces Hermione’s feminism with Harry’s reaction to her and her actions. “Most telling is Harry’s recognition that he needs help from Hermione, and that such a reliance is never emasculating.”<sup>93</sup> This is representative of an obvious, but still important lesson for all readers of the series: sex does not determine worth and girls should be listened to and respected. By showing the male and female perspective of feminism, inclusivity seems natural. To her credit, Hermione’s “is a brand of feminism that specifically seeks to include men in the process—Hermione’s feminism is infectious, and creates other feminists in its wake.”<sup>94</sup>

Hermione’s personal activism is featured in the series as well. After seeing multiple house-elves severely mistreated, Hermione starts S.P.E.W. (the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare) to shed light on the issues that elves face in the wizarding world.<sup>95</sup> Her short-term plans include the following: “to secure house-elves fair wages

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92. Kniesler, “Unlocking Hermione’s Feminism,” 88.

93. Thompson, “From Teenage Witch to Social Activist,” 187.

94. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 7.

95. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2000), 224.

and working conditions” and long-term aims like “changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,” as they are “shockingly underrepresented.”<sup>96</sup>



Figure 10: Depiction of Hermione holding a protest sign that references the S.P.E.W. cause, standing with her cat, Crookshanks.

These sound like perfectly reasonable hopes and Hermione does mean well when she begins her quest to bolster elf rights. However, when others (including the Hogwarts elves themselves) do not get passionately involved with the cause and even disagree with her that the elves want their freedom in the first place, Hermione becomes increasingly frustrated and insists that they should want their freedom.<sup>97</sup> This shows Hermione’s inexperience in activism and with house-elves in particular. She assumes that because house-elves are not their own masters that they do not enjoy their lives. This is

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96. Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 225.

97. Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 383.

obviously not the case as evidenced by the Hogwarts elves happily doing their work and being increasingly embarrassed when it is suggested that they would be much happier as free elves. Even Dobby the house-elf, who embraces the freedom given to him, still cringes at the prospect of earning too much money or speaking ill of his former masters. Hermione continues to ignore what the house elves show her they prefer and goes on thinking that once they are free everything will be better. Later in the series, Hermione resorts to leaving knitwear around the castle so that a house-elf could consider themselves free when picking up after the students, which the house-elves find incredibly insulting and quickly refuse to clean in Hermione's house common room.<sup>98</sup>

Ultimately, the S.P.E.W. movement fizzles out because of Voldemort's return, which forces Hermione to focus on other things, though it is assumed that she would have continued the cause as an adult. However, it is important to note that Hermione ends up realizing her limitations and sees that she does not fully understand the house-elves' situation – or at least understands that some house-elves may not want their “freedom” in the first place. Hermione's wish to help others is valuable and important, but also teaches a few great lessons for her would-be activist readers: come to the table for everyone and use your influence to help others, but make sure those oppressed are the ones who finally get to speak for themselves.

Hermione's passion for the house-elf cause is important, but perhaps not in the obvious way. It is important because it causes her to better understand how she can enact real, positive change. In this way, Hermione meets young activists where they

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98. Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 385.

are: still young, still learning, but determined to help. Despite its flaws, Hermione's activism did influence readers: "Following a discussion of Hermione's activism on behalf of house-elves, one respondent was asked if Hermione's activism inspired her to be more like Hermione, to which the fan replied, 'Yeah, that's something that the three main characters do a lot. And because they do that, it made me want to do that too.'"<sup>99</sup>

As a testament to that activism and the understanding they had of their situation, women and their allies who marched on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017 were already calling the 45<sup>th</sup> president "Voldemort." They understood what his election to the American presidency would mean.



Figure 11: Women's March protest sign which states "When Voldemort is President, we need a nation of Hermiones!"

"The magical world created by Rowling draws young readers into the books by connecting aspects of the world in which they live with a world that transcends reality."<sup>100</sup> So, by utilizing the magical, Rowling clarifies the ordinary. The *Harry*

99. Gierzynski and Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials*, 66.

100. Sara A. Beach and Elizabeth H. Willner, "The Power of Harry: The Impact of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Books on Young Readers," *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma* 76, no. 1 (2002):

*Potter* series provided its fans with a lens through which to see another world that allowed them to see their own world more clearly. It is as if understanding another world allowed the readers to understand their agency within their own world – one without magic spells, but one filled with problems to be solved and people to help solve those problems. The perspective gained through this lens is one of care, understanding, and hope. How could one not be inspired by a group of young friends who decide that they have the power to beat a group of some of the most evil villains possible?

As with most characters that we encounter in adolescence, we might forget exactly what happened in their stories, but we will never forget how those characters made us feel. “Feeling that we are not alone because we find that we share our thoughts, desires, and perspectives with at least one other person (especially if that person is the hero of a story we enjoy), after all, *does* give us greater confidence in ourselves and our views.”<sup>101</sup> And spoiler alert, the heroes win. So, in that striking defeat of a legion of dark wizards, we find our own belief in the possibility of defeating our own demons and oppressors, no matter what form they might take.

As a fitting real-world example, the woman who portrayed Hermione Granger took Hermione’s activism to her own heart in a very real way. Emma Watson is a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador and was instrumental in launching the HeForShe campaign, which highlights male support of women’s causes and feminism.<sup>102</sup> When introducing this campaign, she made a point to emphasize the benefits of feminism that everyone would have once gender equality is realized. It seems as though Watson has her own personal connection with Hermione, too. As cited by Vincent 2011, “Watson

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101. Gierzynski and Eddy, *Harry Potter and the Millennials*, 80.

102. HeForShe, accessed December 31, 2019, <https://www.heforshe.org/en>.



herself has stated, “There is so much of me in Hermione that I couldn’t tell the difference. Her earnestness. Her energy. Her desire to do the right thing. Her determination. She and I both would always speak our mind”<sup>103</sup> This demonstrates the power of Hermione’s character. While Emma Watson likely brought a lot of herself into the role, it is evident that Hermione influenced her, too – even though (to my knowledge), Watson isn’t a witch, either.



Figure 12: Rosie the Riveter style protest sign that features Emma Watson holding a wand.

“Because of the familiar set in fantasy, a reader can externalize, gain vicarious satisfaction and apply ideas or lessons that are not necessarily written by the author but

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103. Bell, *Hermione Granger Saves the World*, 10.

that the readers themselves contribute, to their own lives.”<sup>104</sup> It is through this realism that fans can connect with Hermione. Readers were able to see themselves within her, grow along with her, and be molded by her experiences, all without leaving the comfort of the series’ pages. The readers did not have to fight the battles themselves, but can feel as if they did, simply by experiencing it all along with Hermione, Harry, and Ron.

“Readers bring their own ideas to the text and use it for their own purposes. For girls, those problems could include trying to negotiate power in a patriarchal world. Or, how does one gain friends without losing one’s voice.”<sup>105</sup> Ultimately, Hermione’s journey through the series shows girls that no matter where they start, they can gain courage and power.

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104. Christine Klingbiel, “Hermione Granger: Insufferable Know-It-All or Superhero?”, in *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts*, ed. Christopher E. Bell, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 168.

105. Klingbiel, “Hermione Granger: Insufferable Know-It-All or Superhero?”, 178.

## Conclusion

### What Comes Next?

If Wonder Woman wearing a bustier and thigh-high power boots is your version of feminism, then that is what feminism is! Or if Hermione awkwardly struggling to help house-elves find their voice is your version of feminism, then that's what it is, too. The point of feminism today is for women to finally have unlimited choice in what and who women can be. And more than that, this sort of equity leaves room for women, men, and those outside of the gender binary to be exactly who they wish to be. With all the hope of the past aligned with the inclusivity and aims of the present, we move into a feminism that is welcoming and ready to fight. Feminism today needs to encompass the fight for the legacy of the women of the past, of the present, and the future—for all people to have the right to be whoever and whatever they choose, to be present and heard at every table.

Almost four years to the day after feeling utterly hopeless because of the inauguration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president, I sat smiling in 2021 as Kamala Harris, the first woman Vice President of the United States, was sworn in. I cried on that inauguration day, too, but for far different reasons than in 2017. Instead of ignoring the ceremony and escaping to the dark of a movie theater, I sat rapt on my couch watching the inauguration with quiet tears flowing down my cheeks. As many have said before, “we can't be what we can't see.”<sup>106</sup> Now that a powerful, intelligent, and competent woman broke through the glass ceiling of the executive branch and was elected to one of the

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106. Alaa Murabit, “Imposter Syndrome,” in *Feminists Don't Wear Pink (and Other Lies): Amazing Women on What the F-Word Means to Them*, ed. Scarlett Curtis, (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 106.

most influential offices in our country, nothing feels impossible. We harnessed our power as women to change our fate. No single person is ever the whole solution, but it is those who inspire others to move forward that make the difference. What we see in Vice President Harris as a role model is hope that we could climb a similar mountain and reach the peak victorious, just like Wonder Woman, Leia, and Hermione. “Rebellions are built on hope”<sup>107</sup> and hope is what all these women (both real and fictional) provide to their audience. They have defeated their foes against insurmountable odds. And while modern day, non-fictional foes may take a different form, the forces that act against Wonder Woman, Leia, and Hermione represent very real forces that women face.

By definition, feminism is a conversation in which everyone should be allowed to participate. Today, “being a feminist isn’t so much about your own voice, but how you use your stage to encourage and support other women to find theirs.”<sup>108</sup> It is in this spirit that I make a point (whether I am in class, at work, or with my friends) to remind all the women in my life that I am always cheering them on in anything and everything they do. Whenever they feel that sense of self-doubt creeping into their psyche, I want to be their little reminder of who they are. It is in those moments of self-doubt where we lose our spark – that part of ourselves that knows we could take on any monster we face. Even a slight bit of hesitation could mean the difference between realizing a dream or giving up on it and forgetting about it. I want to cheer everyone on because I know that

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107. “Chapter 28: Jyn Before the Council.” *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, directed by Gareth Edwards (2016; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017), Blu-ray.

108. Olivia Perez, “10 Ways to Support the Women in your Life,” in *Feminists Don't Wear Pink (and Other Lies): Amazing Women on What the F-Word Means to Them*, ed. Scarlett Curtis, (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 166-7.

they can do it—whatever their “it” may be. The women in my life are amazing; they are intelligent, strong, comforting, beautiful humans who are always more capable and more ready than they realize. And if women like that can be made to forget who they are and what they can do, then something about the world needs to change.

It is important to note again that the three figures I have discussed are all middle or upper class (two are literal royalty) and perceivably white (one being Amazonian). While representation is steadily getting better, these figures are still not even close to representative of the world’s population of women. The populations represented within the feminist cause were also historically limited to white, cisgendered women. However, since the feminist movement is becoming increasingly inclusive and intersectional, I believe this is changing for the better. A wider spectrum of women is thankfully becoming more visible, but this is an ongoing fight. “Getting one or two seats for women at the proverbial table won’t guarantee that the face of pop culture becomes one that’s friendlier to women; it’s simply one part of a larger push for women to be more proactive, more unapologetic, and more determined to make spaces in pop culture that represent all the dimensions of women’s lives.”<sup>109</sup>

So, what comes next?

Now that we are beginning to see a more inclusive, diverse group of characters leading films and books, I think more people will realize the power that they have because they will be able to see themselves in those characters. The sort of inclusivity beginning to occur in the world and more specifically within feminism is all about bringing power and visibility to women’s voices—all kinds of women’s voices: young,

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109. Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture*, 21.

old, Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, transgender, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and every kind of woman in between. Wider visibility encourages widespread understanding. Normalizing all types of women as human beings, as equal to men in every way, makes seeing women as role models an everyday occurrence rather than a rarity.

When a hero is representative of a group that has been historically underrepresented, the influence that that hero can have is immeasurable. Because more varied opinions are being shared, more people can see themselves in roles that they previously would have had to experience through a lens that was not their own. When those lenses are diversified, so are our role models. The push for new perspectives in film and literature is timely, particularly for women. Perhaps not coincidentally, the world is now seeing more female leaders ready to take charge and ensure that women's rights are part of the global conversation. The next step is to ensure that all voices are being heard and heeded—to be inclusive to all women in all ways. That sort of equity has the power to change the world for the better, and I cannot wait to see it for myself and on my mother's behalf. Looking forward from my birth in 1991, I can only hope that my dreams for the future of women and girls reflects that of my mother's dream for me back then: that we might all be able to be exactly who we want in every way, shape, and form – and feel confident doing so. With the hope that the future will only become even more open and inclusive, I can only imagine what sort of role models will emerge next. As the journey toward equity of the sexes continues and as more women leaders of all sorts become visible across the globe, even more of us will become what we can see.

While I do not want to have *reason* to protest, it is evident that women will be protesting until real equality becomes reality. With that, I am excited to see what other

pop culture figures start appearing on protest signs. I think Rey from the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy could certainly follow in Leia's footsteps to become the face of our new resistance.<sup>110</sup> Okoye, the leader of the all-woman warrior group in *Black Panther*, could certainly be another figure who might appear on future signs, as well.<sup>111</sup> Like their predecessors, these women are powerful and learn to use what they have to succeed. I also think that with so many inspirational figures that exist in real life, protest signs will continue to feature Amanda Gorman, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Stacey Abrams. Having both real and fictional women shown on protest signs equates them in my mind – meaning that regular women can be heroic and many heroes began as regular women. They motivate us to *do*, to act, to engage, and to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

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110. Abrams, *The Force Awakens*.

111. *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler (2018; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018), Blu-ray.

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