

**The Thesis Committee for Molly Louise Sharp
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:**

Gender, Feminism, and Heroism in Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's

Astonishing X-Men Comics

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Mary Celeste Kearney

Janet Staiger

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Astonishing X-Men Comics

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Molly Louise Sharp, B.A.

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Abstract

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Molly Louise Sharp, M.A.

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Supervisor: Mary Celeste Kearney

Hero characters and their narratives serve as important sites for negotiating a culture's values. Informed by sexism in Western cultures, female heroes often construct and perpetuate women's statuses as second-class citizens. However, female heroes also can and sometimes do work against such representations. This thesis argues for a third wave feminist interpretation of Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* comic books as a text that brings multiple feminist perspectives into conversation with each other and that opposes certain patriarchal systems. Through narrative and formal analysis, I explore female X-Men Emma Frost and Kitty Pryde as characters who reject gender essentialism and misogynist value systems and whose relationship addresses concepts of difference in third wave feminism. Using similar methods, I also explore an interpretation of villain Danger as a failure to integrate radical feminist ideologies into third wave feminism. I believe that *Astonishing X-Men* provides an example of how norms of the mainstream superhero comic book medium, which scholars have criticized as sexist, can be reworked for a new generation of feminists.

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Introduction

Every culture has heroes. Constructions of individuals who embody the very values that define a culture recur constantly in media. Hero narratives proclaim to their audiences, “This is the epitome of who we, as a people, are! When our culture lives, it lives as this!” As the prefix “super” implies, the superhero character takes the hero essence further. These heroes are positioned as existing outside of the societies they protect through their superpowers. Whether the superpower is physical, mental, or something else entirely, it is defined by superiority over what the rest of the superhero’s society could possibly achieve. That is, whereas normal people, even heroes, are bound by the laws of physics and biology, the superheroes are not. These superpowers defend helpless citizens from equally super villains, ones whose goals often lie in the destruction of whole cities or entire societies, against whom a normal hero could not compete. The traditional superhero is the hero who is perpetually unattainable; he or she is the embodiment not only of what a society is, as constructed through the vigorous defense of that society’s values, but what it wants to be, as constructed through a state of superiority. The superhero, more than any other type of hero, is what the culture in which the figure was created should be.

It is easy to understand why American mainstream superhero comic books are often stereotyped as rigidly conservative texts. It is logical that if the heroes and victors of the stories are fighting to preserve a defining set of values for the society in danger, then the hero is defending and preserving the social systems that are already in place rather than questioning what aspects of that society need to change and progress.

Certainly, many American superhero texts, both in and out of mainstream comic books, fill precisely such a Conservative role, but many do not. The stereotype of superheroes as tirelessly patriotic and child-oriented comes in large part from moral panic in 1950s. Comic books' depictions of sex and sexuality, supernatural beings, and gratuitous crime and violence supposedly corrupted American youth, resulting in the Comic Code Authority (CCA). While some comic books did contain blatantly progressive stances on certain sociopolitical issues, with the original *Uncanny X-Men* comics' civil rights allegories providing a prime example, the CCA assured that the heroes themselves were always squeaky clean and that their motives were all-American (Goldin, 2003; Lee, 1974). Decades before the CCA was formed, however, Golden Age¹ texts featuring superheroes like Superman and Wonder Woman were heavily laden with messages about Great Depression and World War II politics, often in defense of immigration and the New Deal. Underground comix during and since the 1960s largely ignored the CCA's guidelines and frequently took liberal and radical perspectives on numerous issues, such as civil rights and the women's movement. And since the decline of the CCA's reign, the past two decades of mainstream American superhero comics have increasingly taken more ambivalent stances, both defending and questioning cultural values. Thus, while comic books have a long history of involvement with sociopolitical issues, the exact parameters of that involvement and its perspectives have varied widely over time, between producers, and across texts.

Constructions of heroism, then, are important sites for negotiating viewpoints about certain sociopolitical issues and sociopolitical change in a culture. The *Astonishing*

X-Men comic book series written by Joss Whedon and with art by John Cassaday is one such text that has yet to be examined from a scholarly perspective. Published from 2004 to 2008, the comics are now available in four volumes, titled (in order) “Gifted,” “Dangerous,” “Torn,” and “Unstoppable.” The series is generally considered a commercial and critical success, winning Eisner awards for Best Artist/Penciler/Inker in 2005 and 2006 and for Best Continuing Series in 2006.

More importantly, these comics provide a unique look at modern women, defending the importance of what I will argue are third wave feminist ideologies to American society and also addressing certain criticisms and setbacks that have complicated and problematized other media constructions of the third wave. I believe that intersections of gender and heroism allow certain female characters, each depicted as strong and powerful but with vastly different worldviews, to interact within the text in ways that potentially can construct a third wave feminist reading. Three characters merit detailed analysis: Emma Frost, a former villain who serves as the new X-Men team’s co-leader; Kitty Pryde, a young nurturer who frequently clashes with Emma; and Danger, an original villain who is a machine that gains consciousness and becomes autonomous.

This thesis will examine the narrative and formal aspects of the text to explore the idea that each of these female characters is somewhat liberated from patriarchy and continues her fight against sexism in an individualized way. The characters have been constructed with dissimilar and sometimes oppositional backgrounds that affect their personal definitions of what, exactly, sex-based oppression is, so the specific methods each woman promotes for achieving liberation are different. Equally important is that

none of the three constructions of feminism exemplified by these characters is perfect. In the narrative, not only does each character face problems that inhibit her personal feminism, but those problems arise in large part because of the feminist choices each has made.

This premise raises several questions about the text and its place within scholarship concerning female and feminist heroism. What, exactly, defines the different feminist perspectives constructed in Emma, Kitty, and Danger, and how do those perspectives interact with the constructions of gender and heroism in each character? In what specific ways do their personal feminism both liberate and inhibit the characters, and what is the significance of presenting each of these feminisms as useful but imperfect? How is any specific form of feminism privileged over other forms of political activism and/or ideology for women in the series, and what is the significance of such privileging? Finally, with all of these questions in mind, what can the *Astonishing X-Men* series contribute to the current understanding of female heroes and superheroes in media?

To be completely clear, I am asking these questions in relation to the text at hand only. I am not, for example, considering the decades of *Uncanny X-Men* that preceded *Astonishing X-Men* or the continuation of the *Astonishing X-Men* title after Whedon and Cassaday stopped producing it, even though I do not deny that these texts affect and are affected by each other. The exceedingly lengthy serial nature of comic book series makes it somewhat difficult to establish boundaries around an object of analysis because multiple time periods and producers inevitably inform each character. It is possible to study characters over their entire fictional lifetime, which can be useful in understanding

how characters have changed to fit into the cultural environment within which they were written. An alternative is to follow a single story arc, which could span months or years under any number of different authors and artists.

I have chosen a third option, defining the text by the run of an author and artist in order to understand the version of the characters presented in the narrative. This means that I will be disregarding anything that happens to characters before or after those authors took over unless the *Astonishing X-Men* series explicitly refers to a previous event. In this way, authorship studies plays a small role in this project, but this is not a study of Whedon and Cassaday. In other words, I am operating under the assumption that the authors of the text can be used to distinguish the text from others that have used one or more of the same characters and story arcs, but I am not seeking to locate the authors within the text or the text's meaning within the careers of these authors. Had the series been written and illustrated as it is by a different team, my assertions about the text would not change.

Mainly this analysis utilizes narrative, formalist, and genre analysis. Narrative analysis is the most heavily used approach because the project's focus lies in how the characters' personalities, decisions, and relationships drive the plot and construct particular messages about various forms of gender identity and feminism.

Formalist analysis plays a very important role in comic book studies, as it will in this specific comic book study, because the medium is heavily visual. Specifically, the designs of the characters and their costumes, where characters are positioned within the panel, and how the artist may manipulate the viewer's focus are considered in this thesis.

Genre analysis helps supplement the previously noted methods by providing comparison to hero narrative norms. For example, to understand what it means that Emma is drawn without excessive muscles and that the source of her superpowers is her mind, one must know in what ways those aspects are similar and dissimilar to other representations of superheroes. Furthermore considerations of genre connect this specific text to a greater understanding of how hero texts in general function as cultural artifacts, which is one of the intents of this project. It is the hero genre and its superhero subgenre to which I turn now.

FEMALE HERO CHARACTERS

With the ubiquity of superheroes in mainstream American comics, comic books are crucial sites for negotiating more general cultural constructions of heroism and their interactions with identity variables that exist across multiple media. The superhero narrative necessarily includes two important events: first, someone is in need of saving and someone else is able to be the savior (Stabile, 2009), and second, the savior is in some way outside of the norms of society, through, for example, mutant DNA, exceptional skills, a propensity for violence, or the leading of a double life with a secret identity (Buttsworth, 2002; Inness, 1999; Shugart, 2009). This structure situates superheroes with the ability to subvert dominant ideologies, like patriarchy in the case of this project, or to uphold them, depending upon just who the savior and victim are as well as how the savior approaches his or her own marginalization. In other words, the questions separating these ideological possibilities are who is saving whom, why does the

savior/victim relationship exist, and how does the savior go about saving (Shugart, 2009; Stabile, 2009; Wolf-Meyer, 2003)?

Since the 1930s, media producers, critics, and audiences have explored the relationship between heroism, gender, and sex through female hero characters in comic books, film, and television, often to mixed and sometimes ambivalent reviews from feminists.² Among the strongest and most often reasserted critical claims regarding female superheroes and their sister women warriors (who may lack superpowers per se but are trained to engage in combat within similar narrative structures) is that their adherence to standards of feminine beauty undermine their active roles in physical combat. That is, their actions veer away from feminine norms of passivity, a notable step forward, but their appearance and/or thoughts about their appearance keep them from being too threatening to male power (Baker & Raney, 2007; Brown, 2004; Durham, 2003; Hains, 2007; Inness, 1999; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Tasker, 1993).

This combination of feminism and femininity has been accomplished in a number of ways. For example, the heroine may be positioned as the object of gaze, as was the case in the television show *Charlie's Angels* and the film *Barb Wire*, among many others (Brown, 2004; Inness, 1999; Tasker, 1993). Another notable example is Rogue's transition from the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants to the X-Men in Marvel comics, in which she tones down her toughness to be accepted by the hero team and simultaneously starts to be concerned with her beauty (Inness, 1999). The way that beauty is connected to both sex and gender in such texts is so incredibly strong that in a content analysis of superheroes in children's television, Baker and Raney (2007) revealed that attractiveness

was one of only two measures in which male and female heroes significantly differed, the other being that the women were also more emotional. This reveals that attractiveness is one of the primary ways that female heroes are coded as both female and feminine.

Durham (2003) has expressed fear that in a modern context, this attention to appearance means that such heroines' value as cultural symbols stems primarily from their ability to sell clothes, make-up, and other beauty-oriented products to women. Furthermore, these constructions could serve to deny power to those real females whose bodies do not fit the very stringent standards of beauty established in these and other media texts (Hains, 2007).

Attractiveness aside, the push and pull between masculine fighting and feminine beauty in contemporary female heroes is still notably more progressive than the multitude of other female characters constructed as powerless and unable to take care of themselves. Many female characters, even so-called "heroes," are often tied up, reminiscent of bondage fantasies, and presented as in need of saving by their male teammates, providing the motivation for action rather than acting themselves (Lavin, 1998; Tasker, 1993). In comic books specifically, many female characters are defined in relation to a male hero counterpart (like Namor and Namora or Hulk and She-Hulk), an association that defines them primarily by their status as women while ensuring that whatever power they have comes from their relationship to a male character, as repeatedly evoked when their names are mentioned (Lavin, 1998).³

An alternative but still problematic common construction of female heroes relies on their over-masculinization. Such characters are physically muscular (a sign of

masculinity that will be discussed in a subsequent section of this thesis) with clothes that downplay their curves and employ masculine fighting methods (e.g. hand-to-hand combat or weapons as opposed to team work or out-smarting the enemy) (Brown, 1999; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Tasker, 1993). In post-Vietnam War incarnations, it is not uncommon for these characters to be motivated in some way by their relationships to their fathers, replacing the son in what is traditionally a father-son narrative (Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007). Much like the beauty-obsessed heroines mentioned above, these masculine women have a dual nature. Such characters can be subversive to dominant gender roles, but connections between sex and gender are so strong in American society that the characters can also be read as basically male, reinforcing these same gender roles (Brown, 1999; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Tasker, 1993).

Two notable factors can be problematic in any of the above cases. First, it is always possible for heroines to act in service to cultural power structures while being positioned outside of them (Shugart, 2009; Wolf-Meyer, 2003). Shugart (2009) sites the X-Men as a specific example; the team, which is composed of both men and women from diverse backgrounds, functions under the leadership of Professor X, a white upper-middle-class male, who decides when and against whom the heroes will fight and also acts as the patriarch of the surrogate family that is Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. This power structure limits the potential for radical feminist readings of *X-Men* comics and other superhero texts with this representational problem. Second, a female hero's femininity can work in opposition to her ability to be a hero. This, I

believe, curbs the possibility of feminist readings more generally in superhero texts by limiting the ways in which female characters can achieve powerful positions.

A few more recent texts have made further strides through heroines who not only transgress gender roles but also transgress the norms of gendered heroism described above, with the title characters from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) being prime examples who unite femininity and heroism. Buffy's petite body and feminine appearance function as a form of camouflage. Looking like a girl who adheres to feminine appearances and behaviors allows her to blend in with her peers and often functions as an edge over her enemies (Buttsworth, 2002). Notably, this camouflage also creates seamless transitions between Buffy's roles as a girl (e.g., student, daughter, friend) and those as the hero. With no secret identity or costume change, it is the student, daughter, and friend who is the hero—they are all parts of the same multi-faceted identity. Buffy also mixes both masculine and feminine fighting tactics, most notably by frequently using her brute strength in the context of planning and calling upon her friends or other slayers, and she eventually uses these mixed tactics outside male-dominated governing bodies like the Watcher's Council and the ancient order that created the first slayer. She must negotiate her own role as a heroine, at times accepting and at times eschewing the cultural connection between heroism and masculinity (Early, 2001). The representation of Xena employs a critical sensibility to comment upon her role in the context of popular culture through the character explicitly addressing and questioning the sexism of her world, pondering why the men surrounding her insist upon objectifying her body instead of focusing on the fact that she is much

stronger and more skilled than they are. She also has a morally ambiguous past that makes the normally feminine ability to access and understand emotions unclear in her case (Inness, 1999). These texts help to reconcile femininity and heroism by giving value to feminine behaviors that are directly related to toughness and by actively questioning the systems of power in which the characters exist.

GENDER IN MARVEL AND OTHER MAINSTREAM SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS

Along with the above discussion of gendered heroes and superheroes across media, it is important to consider norms and standards of gender in comic book superheroes specifically. To read a comic book text without an understanding of the narrative and visual language of comics would absolutely affect interpretations of that text's meaning. This is not to suggest that such norms should go unquestioned. As will be explained below, some of these constructions are extremely problematic, especially from a feminist perspective, but the ways that the text accepts or challenges those norms cannot be adequately recognized without first establishing the symbols that comics share. Since Marvel published the *Astonishing X-Men* series, I will begin with conventions that are specific to the company and continue with those that are shared by several companies including Marvel.

Marvel Comics, harbinger of the Silver Age of comic books, differed from previous mainstream American superhero comics in that one of the main goals of the new company was to add humanity to superheroes. As company founder Stan Lee (1974) wrote about creating Marvel's first team, the Fantastic Four:

I would create a team of superheroes if that was what the marketplace required. But...the characters would be the kind of characters I could personally relate to; they'd be flesh and blood, they'd have their faults and foibles, they'd be fallible and feisty, and—most important of all—inside their colorful, costumed booties they'd still have feet of clay. (p. 17)

This theme is present in every one of Marvel's heroes; no character can be so powerful as to overcome completely his or her flaws. To name a few examples, Tony Stark (Iron Man) is an alcoholic, Peter Parker (Spider-man) is constantly wracked by guilt over the deaths of several characters in his life, and Wanda Maximoff's (the Scarlet Witch) sanity is slowly whittled away by years of domestic trauma. In fact, in the Marvel universe, the label "superhuman" frequently replaces "superhero." Thus, any reading of a Marvel text must consider not only that all heroes will have flaws but that those flaws are as central to the construction of the character as his or her superpowers.

In dealing with the X-Men specifically, each member has his or her own issues, which is among the central topics of this thesis, but prejudice is a running theme shared by all mutant characters. The X-Men face constant fear and hatred from the general public in their universe, and readers and critics often consider mutants to be allegorical for oppressed groups, such as blacks and homosexuals. To delve further, Mikhail Lyubansky (2008) has identified the intolerance experienced by mutants in the Marvel Universe as "envious prejudice"; that is, the majority group treats mutants with very low levels of warmth (meaning that mutants are treated cruelly) while also perceiving the mutants as highly competent. Interestingly, Lyubansky (2008) also identifies many

feminists as recipients of this same type of prejudice from those who position themselves against the feminist movement.

There is another noteworthy aspect of Lee's above quote; his creation of the Fantastic Four came in part from "what the marketplace required" (1974, p. 17). Lee was referring to a need to compete with DC Comics' *Justice League*. While the Marvel stance on humanity in comic book superheroes was revolutionary at the time, this perspective did not exempt Marvel from the need to conform to other industry standards. For this reason, a discussion of a Marvel comic book cannot be complete without considering mainstream American comic book conventions.

One such convention at the time of publication that is absolutely crucial is that Whedon and Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* comics are, to use Geoff Klock's (2002) term, "revisionary superhero narratives." Klock sites Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, both published in 1986, as a sudden leap forward in superhero evolution and the birth of comic book self-consciousness. Jumping off of the increasingly common theme established by Marvel of heroes who want to do good while struggling with the bad, these texts questioned where the line between good and evil fell, then blurred it into complete obscurity. A sudden upsurge of anti-heroes flowed onto comic book shop shelves, and superheroes became increasingly likely to use hostile aggression, meaning aggression enjoyed for its own sake rather than employed toward a morally sound end (Tate, 2008). Even texts that retraced storylines from decades earlier, like Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross' *Marvels* (1994), reconstructed those storylines as somehow different—more violent, less heroic, and thematically ambiguous

(Klock, 2002). As the revisionary superhero narrative continued to evolve, Alan Moore's (1986) now clichéd question, "Who watches the Watchmen?" became more complex—are the watchers and the watched different groups at all? This changing perspective allowed heroes to regain their morality, but the line between good and evil could never be clearly redrawn; the legacy of Miller and Moore was and still is impossible to forget (Klock, 2008).

This is the tradition out of which Whedon and Cassaday's *X-Men* emerge, and heavy influence is evident. In fact, the current text takes the self-consciousness of the revisionary narrative one step further. As is argued in subsequent chapters, Kitty, Emma, and Danger not only fit into the gray area between good and evil, but their relative shades of gray are a driving force of their conflicts, constructing the narrative around the text's questioning of how dark a revisionary superhero needs to be to be revisionary.

Much like the narrative structure discussed above, the visual construction of the *X-Men* characters shows great influence from conventions of the industry, which have changed little since the Golden Age. Stan Lee and John Buscema, a prominent Marvel penciler for forty years, published their book *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* in 1978 to teach comic book artist hopefuls the norms of the industry, and along the way they provide great insight into how gender is constructed through physicality in the comic book world. They explain that men should be angular with wide shoulders and narrow hips, while women should be constructed with curvy lines to make them appear "smooth and soft" (p. 44). Superheroes of both sexes should be abnormally tall with no excess body fat around the waist, abdomen, arms, legs, or head, but female heroes should be

generally smaller than male heroes, except for their large hips and breasts. Quite notably, women should also have little muscular definition. The muscles on action heroes, a category which includes superheroes, are like a form of armor; as opposed to the soft woman, the muscular man seems rock hard, as if a sword would bend rather than stab him (Tasker, 1993). Thus, a lack of muscle is regarded as representative of femininity and physical weakness. The more these features are exaggerated, the more gendered the character becomes. For example, a woman drawn entirely with curved lines and no muscle definition at all is probably meant to be understood as extremely feminine (Johnson, Luyre, & Freeman, 2008; Lee & Buscema, 1978).

While the body of the character is the most obvious place to see gender, the construction of the face is gendered as well. Not unlike their bodies, men's heads should be angular, with a small nose, strong chin, thick hair, and no extra lines on the forehead, nose, or chin (Lee & Buscema, 1979). It follows, then, that women's heads should be constructed of soft, curved lines with small noses that turn up, lips that protrude from the face, thick hair, curved foreheads, and eyebrows that "employ a graceful arch" (p. 97).

Superhero costumes are similarly gendered, although less stringently and specifically. A look through *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia* (Marvel, 2006) reveals that the most typical costume for male heroes is a skin-tight unitard with long sleeves and pants, especially for characters created early in Marvel's history, like Mr. Fantastic. Still, it is not uncommon to see bare arms, legs, or chests on men, although usually not all three; a good example is Luke Cage's look of long pants with an open collared shirt. A few male heroes wear close to nothing, with Namor being the prime example, and a few

men are quite the opposite, like the villains of the Hellfire Club who don Victorian-style suits, but the majority of men fall somewhere in the middle. Women, in contrast, tend to be dressed far more provocatively (Marvel, 2006). A number of women wear unitards similar to those described above, but, with very few exceptions (like the extremely masculine Araña), this skin-tight ensemble is the most conservative female hero outfit. Leotards are quite common, usually with portions of the character's abdomen, breasts, and/or buttocks exposed. Prime examples of this look include Ms. Marvel and She-Hulk. Some female characters wear what closely resembles lingerie—the fact that women of the Hellfire Club dress this way while the men wear suits is rather telling. Overall, both male and female costumes sexualize superheroes somewhat, but the degree to which female heroes expose their bodies is far greater than their male co-workers.

With such long-standing and instantly recognizable artistic standards for comic book superheroes in place, it is unrealistic to expect even the most feminist comic book artists to change completely how mainstream comic book women are drawn, especially for characters like Kitty and Emma who were established decades earlier. Certainly some readers would welcome such changes, and much could be said about the relationship between sexism in media and the physical constructions of comic book characters. As interesting as these topics may be, they are not within the scope of this thesis. Rather, I seek to explore how those pre-existing conditions factor into the text at hand, sometimes in subversive and transgressive ways.

Cassaday can be assumed to have had at least some control over certain aspects of the *Astonishing X-Men*'s art. One such aspect is the relative extent of character

movement. Because comic book panels are still, artists can use extreme points of motion to create the illusion of movement (Lee & Buscema, 1978). The exaggeration makes the action more obvious and forces the eye to fill in more movement—the idea is a bit like animation without tweening. The greater the range of motion in a pose, the more athletic and powerful, and therefore masculine, the character will appear.

Another important tool the artist holds is the ability to sexualize a character with the control of space and time (Mulvey, 1992). In a visually-based medium, gaze is always present, but a full-page panel or a series of many panels that cover only a small range of movement serve temporarily to slow or stop the action, making the character in the panel even more the object of gaze. The question, then, is: At what, exactly, is the audience gazing in such panels? As was the case in the movie *Barb Wire* and the television program *China Beach*, fragmented images of breasts (or sometimes a male chest), buttocks, abdomens, or other parts of the body can serve to objectify sexually a character (Brown, 2004; Mulvey, 1992; Vande Berg, 1993). Similarly, in both normally paced and slowed images, the lighting and framing can draw attention either toward or away from those potentially sexual body parts. So, for example, large breasts and hips could feminize a character, but she could remain relatively not sexualized if the action of the sequence is not stopped to focus on those breasts and hips and the lighting pulls the viewers' eyes away from the torso or if those previously established body parts are not visible in the frame.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND GENDERED BEHAVIOR

Of course, to judge gender and sexuality by appearance alone would be reductive; for an adequate reading, especially a narrative analysis, one must also consider the behavior of the character in question. Gendered behavior in this thesis will be analyzed on the basis of social psychology. The word “psychology” can sometimes be a red flag in gender-related research because psychology is connotatively tied to concepts of biology. On the contrary, I am using these specific studies and concepts to inform this project precisely because of their relationship to culture. All of the following studies were conducted on Americans and were published relatively recently. They are scientific observations of typical cultural behaviors occurring within the historical context in which the *Astonishing X-Men* comics were written, and none of these studies claim biology to be the sole source of their results. With this in mind, these gendered behaviors can be quite useful in understanding how fictional characters are constructed in that these actions and attitudes are, for the most part, instantly recognizable to the audience as well as to the writer and artist. That is, these behaviors can be quickly and easily identified as a means of constructing gender and are among the character attributes I consider important in reading the text.

To exhaust all psychological literature covering gendered behavior would greatly exceed the space of this introduction (and for that matter the space of the entire thesis), so the focus here is on gender differences in social relationships, problem solving techniques, and aggression, which are of particular interest to superhero teams. Psychologists have begun relatively recently to differentiate between physical aggression

and relational aggression (sometimes called “psychological aggression”). In both forms, the aggressor intends to execute an isolated harmful act, but in physical aggression that intentional harm comes through physical means, such as hitting another person, while in relational aggression, the harm comes through non-physical means, such as snide comments or denials of friendship (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2005). Boys and girls tend to be equally aggressive by age six, but for boys that aggression is primarily physical, and for girls it is relational, especially in antipathy relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, et al., 2001; Murray-Close & Crick, 2006). While psychologists have conducted most studies of relational aggression with children as participants, similar results have been found in adults (Werner & Crick, 1999). It is also important to consider that gender acts as both a person and a stimulus variable; that is, gender is a way of understanding oneself (person) as well as a cue for how others should treat a person (stimulus) (Hyde & Durik, 2005). This means that a feminine person would not only be more likely to aggress relationally than physically but also to be the victim of relational aggression.⁴

These studies of feminine relational aggression are particularly interesting when considered along with studies of women in social relationships. Women tend to report having a greater number of social relationships than men and that those relationships are more important to them than they are to men (Kenrick, Neuberg, & Cialdini, 2007). Furthermore, women are more likely than men to seek support from those relationships during times of trauma (Kenrick, et al., 2007; Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2003). For women, then, a very vicious system is in place; they place great value in the very thing that they might attack and that others may use to attack them.

Gender differences in problem-solving styles are closely related to the patterns observed in social relationships. Men tend to rely on and be motivated by competitive strategies in solving a problem or achieving a goal, and women tend to utilize cooperative strategies, particularly making sure that everyone's voice is heard and that everyone has a role to play (which also implies that a plan is thought out before taking action) (Fisher & Grégoire, 2006; Leszynski & Strough, 2008; Van Vugt, et al., 2007). This tendency seems to be a particularly salient cue for identifying gender, as both young boys and girls self-report that they are more feminine after being instructed to cooperate than they do after being instructed to compete and that they are more masculine after being instructed to compete (Leszynski & Strough, 2008). These behaviors occur in spite of the fact that both men and women report being more satisfied with problems solved through cooperative means than those solved through competitive means (Fisher & Grégoire, 2006).

SECOND AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

In order to connect social psychological theories of gender, as described above, to constructions of feminism within the *Astonishing X-Men* series, my theoretical perspective in this project will be third wave feminist. Rather than applying to the text my own opinions of what feminism is or is not, I am looking for how each character reveals her own opinions about feminism and how those differing opinions work with and against each other in the narrative. Similarly, I am looking for how gender is constructed in each character and how differing gender relates to each character's feminism and heroism. Because of this, my definition of "feminist" is based simply on

gender liberation and not on any one set of gendered behaviors. Becoming free of whatever it is that each character considers sex-based oppression to be through whatever means the character chooses will be read as a manifestation of feminism. It is important to note that while intersections of sex and gender with other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic class, often characterize third wave feminism (as will be further explained below), an examination of these traits in *Astonishing X-Men* is outside the scope of this project. Such an examination would be pertinent to a complete understanding of the text, especially considering the X-Men's history of alignment with racial issues and the fact that the backgrounds of the characters in the text differ somewhat. Kitty is Jewish, Armor is Asian, and Colossus is a Russian immigrant, to name just a few. To examine all of these intersections and their interactions of feminism within the text would greatly exceed the space of this thesis. So I have chosen to consider only feminism, gender, and heroism at this time. However, I recommend the examination of other aspects of identity as further research into the text.

While this project takes a third wave feminist perspective, an overview of second wave feminism is essential to its theoretical background for two reasons. First, the third wave grew directly from the second, both in that it critiques certain omissions of the second wave ideologies and in that it relies in part upon advances made by second wave activists. Second, one of the three characters who are the subjects of this project, Danger, is closely related to radical feminist ideology, which emerged during the second wave. Thus, I will begin my explanation of feminist theories as they pertain to the specific text at hand with the second wave.

Second wave feminism in the United States occurred primarily in the 1960s and 1970s as women renewed speaking out against the disproportional amount of power held by men. While earlier feminists had gained women some legal power, such as the right to vote and sign contracts, women still lagged drastically behind men in educational and occupational opportunities and were considered by most Americans to have a “proper” place immersed in domesticity (Flynn, 1997; Henry, 2004; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Steeves, 1987; Whelehan, 1995). Second wave feminists mostly agreed that women as a group constituted an oppressed sisterhood, and they shared certain broad goals, including acquiring reproductive rights, establishing more stringent rape and domestic abuse laws, receiving equal pay for equal work, and gaining societal acceptance for women who choose not be wives and/or mothers (Halbert, 2004; Owen, et al., 2007; Whelehan, 1995). However, not all feminists agreed on the best way to achieve these goals or even on the underlying sources of the problem.

Radical feminism, which is the most pertinent feminist ideology from the second wave for the current study, operates under the assumption that men and women are essentially different—not just in terms of reproductive biology but in terms of psychology, with women being naturally nurturing and peaceful (Donovan, 2000; Halbert, 2004; Maddux, 2008; Steeves, 1987; Whelehan, 1995). Whereas liberal feminists believe that legal reform opens doors to the same educational and occupational opportunities that men receive (Owen, et al., 2007; Steeves, 1987; Whelehan, 1995) and Marxist feminists see capitalism as the root of oppression toward women (Steeves, 1987), radical feminists of the 1970s fought patriarchy, the systematic dominance of men in

society. This patriarchy, they argued, was historically the primary form of sex-based oppression and was so incredibly deep-seeded that no amount of simple reform could uproot it. Rather, women had to create their own sociopolitical reality that celebrates their intrinsic femininity without becoming slaves to patriarchal manipulation of that femininity (Donovan, 2000; Maddux, 2008; Steeves, 1987). Liberal feminists of the time sought ways to fit into male-dominated society while radical feminists sought ways to change society to fit them. A common analogy is that liberal feminists wanted a bigger piece of the pie, and radical feminists asked why they would want a bigger piece of pie if the pie is rotten (Henry, 2004). Radical feminists also emphasized the need of a “revolution of consciousness” among women in a realm completely free of men to make women, as a sex class, realize their oppressed status within the patriarchy as an early step toward overcoming it (Whelehan, 1995).

Not surprisingly, radical feminism’s essentialism has been the source of much of its criticism by later feminists. Treating women as a homogenous sex-class meant declaring that all women shared the same basic oppressive experiences, a declaration many women-of-color feminists found more than a little problematic (Heywood & Drake, 1997; Owen, et al., 2007). Others pointed out that radical feminists’ views on the exact parameters of patriarchy went unquestioned within their group (Whelehan, 1995). Furthermore, the radical feminist avowal that “the personal is political” and the ferocity with which they tore into opposing viewpoints have been identified as key factors in the stereotype of feminists as angry, loud, man-hating, and at least a little bit hypocritical, forcing women to comply with another version of what they should be, a different picture

of the ideal woman than before but a picture perfect one nonetheless (Bronstein, 2005; Foss & Foss, 2009; Olson, et al., 2008; Whelehan, 1995).

Of course, radical feminists were not the only second wave women under fire in the 1980s. Liberal feminists received similar criticisms from younger and women-of-color feminists. Some women felt pressured by liberal feminists to embrace masculine characteristics, seeing this as the only way to become empowered in a society that valued masculinity and systematically placed men in positions of power (Owen, et al., 2007; Shoemaker, 1997). This view of liberal feminism was exaggerated into a stereotype of feminists as male identified.

Perhaps the most prominent criticism of both liberal and radical feminists in academia is that these groups addressed the needs of white middle-class heterosexual women as if their needs represented every woman's needs (Flynn, 1997; Foss & Foss, 2009; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Owen, et. al., 2007). Non-white, non-middle-class, and homosexual women whose voices were excluded from second wave discourses developed in part third wave feminism, as did other women, some who were white middle-class heterosexuals, who embraced postmodern and poststructuralist theories, causing them to question whether viewing women as a homogenous group could sufficiently address individuals' experiences and problems.

The core of third wave feminist ideology is that a person's identity cannot be understood by a single attribute (e.g., femaleness). Women's identities are multifaceted, women's experiences with oppression will inevitably differ, and no one experience

should take precedence over another. As Jennifer Drake and Leslie Heywood (1997) put it:

[Third wave feminists] know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something that I participate in, and what oppresses me may be something you participate in...We are products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism. (3)

This open-mindedness has complicated feminist scholarship with questions about how to define feminist ideologies. Third wave feminist media scholars seem mostly to agree that American culture is media-saturated to the degree that the study of culture by examining media is a sociopolitical endeavor (Aragon, 2008), but they are in far less agreement about what exactly popular media products preach. Some scholars and audiences critique popular television programs like *Sex and City* (1998-2004), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) as depicting privileged career women whose liberation is undermined by how easily they give in to expectations of domesticity. Others, though, read the same texts as representations that embrace the contradictions of identity with which audience members struggle in the real world and in their own lives (Anderson & Stewart, 2005; Gerhard, 2005; Lotz, 2006; Moseley & Read, 2002; Rockler, 2006). Thus, questions of boundaries swirl among third wave feminists. What, exactly, qualifies as proper feminism? If oppression cannot be clearly defined, then how can liberation from that oppression be recognized?

Journalism and popular media frequently construct third wave feminism in opposition to the second wave instead of as a movement that grew out of it, skewing the

meanings and goals of both terms (Anderson & Stewart, 2005; Borda, 2009; Bronstein, 2005; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001). In reality, third wave feminism owes a great debt to the second wave. After all, the battles fought by second wave women are responsible for even the possibility of women in the high-paying jobs depicted in the previously mentioned television shows, not to mention that some of the women writing these critiques undoubtedly would never have entered academia without their feminist foremothers fighting for educational opportunities. Furthermore, third wavers still share some of the same goals from the second wave, such as equal pay for equal work and reproductive freedom (Heywood & Drake, 1997; Owen, et al., 2007). In spite of what should be obvious connections to the second wave, the same media forces that once bolstered negative stereotypes of second wave feminists put forth the idea that this new wave of feminism works against the previous one (Bronstein, 2001), an idea that was perpetuated by some women who were especially critical of the second wave for the reasons listed above.

Popular discourses of post-feminism inform the above construction. The term “post-feminism” first appeared in the conservative climate of the 1980s and implies a time when feminist activism is over (Shugart, et al., 2001). While post-feminism has been defined differently by different scholars, Angela McRobbie (2004) and later Rosalind Gill (2007) have described it as a sensibility that takes previous feminist victories for granted while choosing to ignore the still prevalent systems that made those victories necessary in the first place, thus appreciating but rejecting feminist ideologies. Self-absorption and shifts in media constructs toward obsession with the body as a site of

gender, overt sexualization, and women's choices as a form of empowerment (although critics and scholars might disagree with those women about the degree of empowerment involved) all mark post-feminism as a distinct sensibility (Gill, 2007). These qualities are related to depictions of feminism in tension with femininity and are still prevalent in current media texts and popular discourse (Gill, 2007; Moseley & Read, 2002). Post-feminist femininity is displayed primarily through physicality rather than psychology, and women's bodies are a self-proclaimed site of power and agency (Gill, 2007). The sensibility proclaims that when women are fully aware of the cultural influences over their decisions and are not in a position to be objectified by others who misconstrue their choices, they may be able to access agency through their bodies, usually neglecting to point out the rarity of those circumstances. McRobbie's (2004) and Gill's (2007) definition of post-feminism establishes a clear difference between post-feminism and third wave feminism, with the former concerned primarily with individual women and the commercial environment that can sway them to accept and even buy into their own objectification and the latter describing an examination of individual women and their relationships to larger cultural systems which they recognize as oppressive although they may disagree on the forms that oppression takes. For this reason, I will use their definition of post-feminism throughout this project.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

This thesis takes a third wave approach to understanding varying constructions of female superheroes, the reading of which will draw primarily from second and third wave feminism. As I will argue, the problems faced by the characters that relate to their

personal feminisms cannot be explored sufficiently by assuming that the characters are tossing aside their liberties. Rather, the characters and their story are best examined by exploring how each woman can work through her problems in ways that allow her to maintain her feminist position without robbing her co-workers of their feminist positions. With this perspective established, I will now briefly explain the three chapters that follow this introduction.

The first chapter will focus on Emma Frost as a third wave feminist character who struggles with both her gender and her heroism throughout the four *Astonishing X-Men* volumes. Emma's highly feminine visual construction conflicts with her cold, masculine behavior. Furthermore, Emma has two superpowers, one that coincides with a feminine fighting style and another that is decidedly masculine. The chapter examines Emma's journey throughout the text to recognize the power of her learned femininity while struggling with her villainous past, a plight which connects femininity to the character's heroism. Emma's conflicted gender and troubled past also bring forth her simultaneous fall from leadership, heroism, and agency in the third volume from which she subsequently recovers by embracing her femininity to a fuller degree. In this way, Emma's version of feminism and heroism are made possible through learning to embrace femininity, establishing femininity as a possible form of third wave feminist empowerment as well as assigning it cultural value.

The second chapter compares Emma and Kitty Pryde and examines their relationship. After an analysis of how Kitty is constructed with masculine physicality and ambiguously gendered superpowers, the focus shifts to the antagonistic relationship

between Kitty and Emma. The connection between heroism and feminism is such that the characters' shared goals and fundamentally differing opinions about how to reach those goals can be usefully read not only through a third wave feminist lens but as comments on third wave feminism itself. The ability of each character to learn to respect the other without being forced to change her own ideals will be explored as a unique type of relationship that has historically been underutilized in media texts that focus on friendships, partnerships, or antagonistic relationships between female characters.

Danger is the focus of the third chapter. Her continuous fight against Professor Xavier (X-Men comics' traditional symbol of patriarchy), characterization of her kind as a class of beings oppressed by that patriarchy, and use of consciousness-raising as her primary form of recruitment characterize her as radical feminist figure. However, her choice of words and methods of fighting oppression are also laden with characteristics of radical feminist stereotypes, and her behavior within this stereotype prevents Danger from her potential heroism. Through an examination of this character, I explore the idea that in spite of the acceptance of difference established through Kitty and Emma's relationship, the text does not readily accept radical feminist ideology, which is problematic for the text's distinctly third wave feminist stance.

Ultimately, the analysis of Whedon and Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* explores feminism and gender in superhero narratives in a way that has been largely ignored, perhaps due in large part to insufficient texts. The fact that different women are able to obtain and maintain power in extremely different ways reveals an individualistic perspective on feminism which can include masculinity, femininity, or some of each.

Importantly, the text allows these multiple perspectives on feminism and heroism to interact within the same space. This open-minded approach to the superhero narrative moves the focus of flawed feminism from the problem itself to how the characters deal with and are affected by the problem. If feminism has many possible manifestations, then the key to understanding it is not to observe conflict but to observe the character as she tries, successfully or unsuccessfully, to push through that conflict. Furthermore, shifting focus away from compromise and friendship and toward respect and tolerance may provide insight into negotiating third wave feminism in media texts that contain opposing feminist views. By analyzing Danger, Emma Frost, and Kitty Pryde, this thesis explores connections among feminism, gender, and heroism in the *Astonishing X-Men* comics to reveal an unusual perspective on fictional female heroes in media.

Footnotes

¹Comic book history is typically divided into two eras. The Golden Age began in the 1930s and is most prominently defined by D.C. Comics. The Silver Age began in the 1960s and is most prominently defined by Marvel Comics. As explained in the literature review, some people identify a literary shift in the 1980s that marks a third era that is not yet commonly named.

²This is not to say that heroism, gender, and sex have been explored exclusively through female hero characters. Male heroes and non-hero characters are also very important in understanding these complex cultural constructions. Such characters have been excluded from this particular discussion for purposes of space and clarity, as they are not the focus of this project.

³Creating superheroes who are female versions of already established male heroes has become a much less common practice since the 1980s. However, because many of these characters are still written as integral elements in current Marvel comics, the issue is relevant to comics published after the 1980s as well.

⁴This is not to imply that gender as a stimulus variable predicts aggression style as a rule. As with all behavioral tendencies, exceptions do occur. For example, domestic violence against women and violent bullying against homosexuals are obvious recurring instances of physical aggression against feminine people. In these cases, motivation includes attempts to control another person, which extends beyond the standard intent of aggression to harm a person in a single isolated instance. In this way, the exact circumstances of the aggressive act(s) will inevitably affect the style of aggression

chosen. That such exceptions do exist and are hardly rarities is important to understand, but this does not negate the general tendencies observed by psychologists.

Chapter 1: Emma Frost and Her Subversion of Gender Value Systems

Characterized equally by a blonde bombshell body and an icy, heartless demeanor, Emma Frost of the *Astonishing X-Men* series is among the most peculiar female heroes. Riddled with ambiguity, Emma's villainous past and harsh disposition frequently result in both the audience and her fictional teammates questioning her intentions, making her an exceptionally revisionary hero. Even more unusual, the narrative of Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* ties Emma's villainy to both subordination and masculinity while her heroism is associated with her role as a leader and her efforts to learn femininity. In a genre in which masculinity provides the very definition of the word "hero," Emma can be accepted as a hero only by denying her masculinity. This premise works to reconstruct the positive-negative value binary of gender that is deeply rooted within patriarchy and has historically forced the feminine and the heroic into competition with each other in hero narratives.

In order to explore this idea in depth, this chapter will begin with an explanation of the ways in which previous hero texts have constructed tensions between heroism and femininity. An analysis of these qualities in Emma will follow, beginning with her formal aspects of her physical construction and framing. The analysis will continue with an examination of Emma's gender and hero roles within the narrative structure of the *Astonishing X-Men* series. By combining the formal and narrative elements, this chapter will demonstrate a reading of the text in which Emma takes on distinctly third wave feminist characteristics and works to deconstruct the patriarchal value system that favors masculinity over femininity.

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN HERO CHARACTERS

The traditional discontinuity between femininity and heroism has plagued female heroes across media for decades, providing producers with ways to undermine the potential threats female heroes posed to power structures designed to favor men. Of course, this is not to suggest that femininity and heroism must always exist in problematic opposition with each other. As explained in the introduction, third wave feminist ideologies have influenced several female heroes created since the mid-1990s, like Buffy Summers and the version of Emma Frost discussed in this chapter, and these characters have helped to reconcile the two qualities. Other female heroes influenced by liberal feminism have been constructed as powerful, liberated characters within the feminine-heroic binary. Nonetheless, the strong legacy of patriarchy that predated these more feminist constructions of female heroes ensures that while increasingly common, these characters are exceptions rather than rules, which is one of the main reasons these characters stand out as noteworthy. The progress made over the last few decades has not yet reached the point in which narratives that construct femininity and heroism as incongruous are no longer normative, especially in the world of mainstream American superhero comic books where old texts remain important to storylines long after their original publications and where formal standards have progressed little.

With this in mind, it follows that masculinity typically plays a crucially important role in American superhero comic books. Masculinity first and foremost defines male superheroes. The more enormous his armor of muscles is and the more physically active he is in the savior role (as opposed to the physically stagnant and passive role of the

saved), the more heroic the man becomes (Howard III & Prividera, 2008; Lee & Buscema, 1978; Li-Collmer & LaPoint, 2003; Shugart, 2009; Stabile, 2009; Tasker, 1993). While heroes are certainly identified in terms of race and class as well as gender, the former two have become slowly more diverse in comic book superhero narratives (although much progress still remains to occur) while the latter has not (Howard III & Prividera, 2008; Stabile, 2009).

In fact, emphasizing masculinity has been one of the methods used to offset variations in normative race and class. For example, Luke Cage, the black hero from Harlem, is not only among the most muscular Marvel heroes, with an official height and weight listed in *The Marvel Encyclopedia* (Marvel, 2006) at six-and-a-half feet tall and 425 pounds, but his costumes often reveal his rippling torso. Similarly, the Black Panther, an African king, exceeds far beyond average in his muscular physique as well as in the masculine realms of martial arts, science, and political power.

The reverse is not true. Being white and middle-class cannot pacify the absurdity of a hero who fails in his masculinity. Put simply, to be weak, passive, irrational, or in any other way defined as traditionally feminine is to be incapable of fulfilling the role of protector and savior and therefore of hero. Furthermore, villains are typically feminized in some way. They are weak, appear fragile, and develop schemes or devices that allow them to escape physical combat (until the hero inevitably forces it upon them), among other traits (Li-Collmer & LaPointe, 2003). This is especially true for animated adversaries whose bodies, like those of heroes, are designed to emphasize certain defining traits and are not bound by laws of biology. Villains often, for example, are

abnormally thin, have eyelash lines that are much thicker than the hero's, or have excessively long and delicate hands (Howard III & Prividera, 2008; Li-Collmer & LaPointe, 2003).

In a society built by men and designed to sustain men's power within it, that extreme masculine physicality and behavior would be associated with heroes who save their entire worlds from impending doom could only be described as logical. Of course a patriarchal society will assign masculine traits to the heroes it constructs; those are the traits most valued within patriarchal societies. In a cyclical fashion, the physicality and behaviors the heroes represent will be reinforced as valuable to the culture within which they reign simply because of the "hero" label. In this way, hero narratives function as sites where existing societal power structures are reinforced and where modern incarnations of those structures are constructed.

Just as heightened masculinity can be utilized to integrate into a hero role a character that is in some way othered, emphasis on a female hero's femininity can serve to undermine her heroic nature, making her seem less threatening to the patriarchal order within which she works (Brown, 2004; Durham, 2003; Hains, 2007; Howard III & Prividera, 2008; Inness, 1999; Stablie, 2009). As explained in the introduction, femininity has been incorporated into females in hero narratives in two heavily recurring ways. Villains frequently capture female heroes, not unlike supporting female characters in male heroes' stories. These captive female heroes may find ways to escape on their own, or, more commonly, male heroes may come to their rescue (Lavin, 1998; Tasker, 1993). These heroines leap to fight when trouble abounds, just like their male

counterparts, but they then transition from active savior into passive victim. Even in cases where the woman recovers her savior position by finding her own way out of the villain's grasp, she has failed in her role as hero by being caught; her flawed heroism, i.e., her inability to overpower the enemy, translates to flawed masculinity and makes her secondary to male heroes.

Similarly, it is not uncommon for female heroes to utilize feminized fighting strategies, such as guile and seduction or striking with a handbag instead of a fist (Inness; 1999). Whether or not these methods accomplish the task at hand, and results do vary, this type of combat is presented as defensive or sneaky instead of purely heroic. Feminization of female heroes can also occur through the formal rendering of their physicality by way of curved lines, lack of muscle, sexual objectification, or all three (Brown, 2004; Lee & Buscema, 1978; Tasker, 1993; Vande Berg, 1993); highlighting the relative weakness and heterosexual desirability in a female body confirms that, capable as she may be, the woman is also an object of pleasure. Her heroics are cute, fun, and fantastic rather than gritty, powerful, and important, and she certainly could not usurp men's power from them—at least, not from normative masculine hero men.

The mere inclusion of woman in the “hero” category at all is a notably progressive step for mainstream superhero comic books in the United States, but strategies that put that step into motion leave much to be desired from a feminist standpoint. The feminization of these heroines makes them second-class heroes who make a statement that women can do anything men can do, with the qualification that they cannot do it quite as well. While better than an alternative in which women cannot

do anything of value at all, this is still a statement supporting patriarchy rather than working against it. Instead of subverting the necessity of masculinity as a prerequisite for heroism, the female heroes described above are heroic on one hand and feminine on the other; these attributes work against each other. Again, this is not to suggest that these attributes cannot coexist but rather that the hero narratives that either predate third wave feminist influence (and many predate second wave influence for that matter) or choose to ignore it construct female heroes who lack the positions of leadership, sexual agency, communication skills, and other attributes that define the heroism of third wave feminist characters like *Astonishing X-Men*'s Emma.

Masculinized action heroines who became recognizable during the feminist backlash in the 1980s took perhaps a bigger step forward but were, like their feminine predecessors and contemporaries, problematic when viewed through a third wave feminist lens. Female heroes with muscular bodies, weaponry expertise, and natural combative skills were constructed with emphasis on traits traditionally associated with masculinity to drown out femininity (Holmlund, 2005; Tasker, 1993). Certainly a female body effectively performing acts of heroism, being that they are so strongly tied to the male form, is in itself a form of subversion to the patriarchal status quo, especially in comparison to the feminine heroines described previously (Inness, 1999; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Tasker, 1993). However, the extremity of these female heroes' masculinity created a Catch 22 that became a problem for third wave feminists. As Leigh Shoemaker (1997) explained: "The legacy of second wave feminism had taught me that, as a girl, I could do anything I wanted to, but the backlash let me know that this was

possible only as long as I wasn't a girl—as long as I wasn't soft and feminine and weak” (p. 115). This attitude serves patriarchy. If a woman must become as much like a man as she can to be a member of society, then it is still men and their masculinity that reign (Gubar, 1994; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007; Shoemaker, 1997). In other words, the liberal feminist goal of equality between the sexes was absolutely a core element of overly masculine female heroes, but the third wave feminist goal of equality between genders had, in retrospect, not yet been realized in female hero characters and their narratives.

Thus, while these masculine female heroes of the 1980s revealed the fallacy of gender essentialism, the characters failed to subvert the value system that is bonded to gender. This system of values puts a positive spin on the traits that yield the desired results in the world men (and white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual men, at that) built to suit their needs and the maintenance of their power; masculine hero traits—the tough body, physical strength, dog-eat-dog attitude—are useful to the hero because they allow him (or her) to crush his competition on the battlefield, just as a man might crush his competition in the realms of politics, the military, or capitalist business. A woman who takes on the roles of a man in exactly the way he would can subvert concepts of gender but not the patriarchy that ascribes value to gender; it is still masculinity and by association men who are desirable for positions of power.

During the rise of masculine heroines, revisionary heroes began to appear in comic books, and they were flooding store shelves by the early 1990s (Klock, 2002). To assert that the two events were directly related would be to jump hastily to conclusions,

but it seems more than sheer coincidence that male roles held within female bodies in popular media would be followed soon after by an upsurge in interest surrounding comic books that featured characters, almost entirely male, who were masculine to a sickening degree and that questioned the very definitions of heroism. It was as if the female heroes of the 1980s were so jarring to the long-held comic book tradition of weaker feminine female heroes that comics faced a crisis of sex and gender. If women could be equally as heroic as men, then perhaps male heroes had not been masculine enough in the first place, which the increase in violence, aggression, and questionable motivation addressed. But with the heroes' righteousness facing newfound ambiguity, the increased masculinity brought with it questions about the boundaries of heroism.

Thus, it follows that there may be more than coincidence involved in the appearance of characters in the late 1990s, like Buffy, the vampire slayer, and Xena, the warrior princess, who questioned the masculine nature of heroism. Through techniques such as explicitly questioning why male characters insisted on sexualizing the heroines, eschewing male power structures that sought to control heroines' actions (e.g., the Watcher's Council or the tribe of elders who first created the slayer), and incorporating feminine fighting styles, like premeditated planning and teamwork, into combat situations, Buffy, Xena, and their company are able to assign value to their femininity in situations where such value is fit (Buttsworth, 2002; Durham, 2003; Early, 2001; Inness, 1999). Their revaluing of gendered traits makes these heroines more proficient in actively subverting patriarchal structures than any of the other recurring hero types discussed thus far, but such characters also tread along very fine lines. It is easy in such

texts for value placed on gender to be read as value placed on sex, especially in cases where femininity is expressed partially through physical constructions. If sex, rather than gender, becomes the source of the character's value, then the text establishes an essentialist connection between femininity and the female sex, the inhibiting association previous heroines tried to break, and the text also crosses into a type of hegemony in which the othered rise up and crush their oppressors rather than creating an environment that appreciates difference (Gubar, 1994; Shoemaker, 1997). These heroines must also be careful to avoid slipping too far into a post-feminist paradigm in which their femininity glamorizes sexual objectification and capitalist beauty cultures (Dow, 1996; Durham, 2003; Owen, Stien, & Vande Berg, 2007).

Emma Frost follows in the wake of this last female hero type, taking patriarchal subversion one step further. In her journey through the *Astonishing X-Men* narrative, Emma proves that her femininity does not hinder her ability to be a hero, and it is only by being feminine that she is able to perform heroics at her best. The four-volume narrative along with the unique constructions of her body, costume, and superpowers reflect strength through femininity while avoiding both the essentialist and post-feminist traps that can push an otherwise subversive heroine into the service of patriarchy.

EMMA'S BODY AND APPEARANCE

The great importance of the body to hero narratives makes the analysis of any hero's physical construction imperative. Emma's physical construction is overtly feminine. The lines that make up her body, especially around her torso, are almost exclusively curvy, a trait which, as explained in the introduction, is a marker of

heterosexual femininity in comic books (Lee & Buscema, 1978). She has a slim waist, gently curved hips, and large breasts that are defined around their sides as well as their bottoms, as opposed to just the latter like several of the other female characters in the series. While she is far from waif-like, she has little muscle definition around her arms and legs, and the muscle definition of her abdomen varies from none at all to slightly muscular in a way that seems to suggest physical fitness more than strength.

In contrast to her body, Emma's face is constructed in a more masculine manner. When viewed from the front, the lines forming her head are straight from crown to jaw line. Her nose is long and lacks excess bumps, her ears lay back close to her skull, and her eyebrows, while they do point downward toward the top of her nose, are drawn as straight diagonal lines that curve only at the ends. However, Emma is usually drawn with obvious cosmetics, including very pale blue eye shadow, unnaturally thick lash lines that seem to indicate mascara, and shiny, icy blue lipstick. Emma is topped off with thick straight blonde hair pushed back from her face to reveal a large flat forehead.

The contradictions between Emma's feminine body, hair, and make-up and her masculine face paint a complex picture of her gender. Her face, her only physically masculine feature, is the part of her body that is expressive and matches her often compassionless speech. For example, her speech to students attending the newly rebuilt Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters at the beginning of the first volume, which includes, "They will always hate us. We will never live in a world of peace" (2004, p. 10), or, when trying to get under Scott's skin during her attack on her teammates in the third volume, "Hank [Beast] is a genius and terribly good with people. Warren [Angel,

from the original X-men team] looked like a god. And Xavier picks you? To lead. Why? Because you had nothing else” (2006-2007, p. 36-37). Both statements feature a close-up or extreme close-up of Emma from a side view, emphasizing the points of her nose and chin and the straight lines between them. Emma’s cosmetics, which become clearer when she is positioned closer to the audience, accent that she is learning to perform femininity rather than it residing naturally within her, an important aspect of the heroine’s construction which will be discussed later in this chapter. Emma’s feminine body, in particular her well-defined breasts, serves as a reminder of her sex. Unlike the overly masculinized heroine bodies discussed previously, there is no doubt that a female performs the actions stemming from this body. Furthermore, the feminine body matches a primarily feminine superpower, which, like her body, is the result of her fictional DNA within the Marvel universe.

Emma’s feminine and heterosexually desirable physique makes her a prime candidate to be read as the object of gaze. Importantly, her costume both contributes to and detracts from the possibility. As her name might suggest, Emma Frost wears all white, a quality reminiscent from her status as the White Queen in the Hellfire Club prior to joining the X-Men. In civilian attire, she dons white pants and white tops of various sleeve and neckline styles that usually bare her midriff and always reveal her cleavage. Her hero costume, which she wears more often than her other outfits combined, is quite similar, although it is very different from her teammates’ black, blue, and yellow patterned unitards. Emma’s outfit again features white pants and a white top with stomach and cleavage exhibited. Her uniform top exposes her shoulders and includes

seams that are somewhat similar to a bustier, and a long white cape flows behind and around her, attached to the top of her shirt rather than around her neck or on her back. This cape is a key element as it allows for blocking the audience's sexualizing gaze. In many of the shots where Emma's body would be shown, the cape instead covers her body by falling partially or completely around her body in a cylindrical shape. A great number of close-up shots of Emma's and other characters' faces also achieves this subversion of gaze, cutting the covered or uncovered body out of the frame entirely. Of course, this artistic style may serve other purposes, such as making the text seem more cinematic or more melodramatic, but this does not change the fact that the feminine sexual body remains out of view.

EMMA'S REJECTION OF POST-FEMINISM

While it seems that Emma's sexuality may have successfully downplayed throughout the *Astonishing X-Men* series, the text cannot avoid showing her body altogether, and Emma's cleavage often makes appearances even when her abdomen, hips, and buttocks do not. This visual construction permits the audience to see Emma's attractive body and potentially to understand her clothing as post-feminist flaunting of her sexuality to other characters in the story and to readers. Certainly the text, like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), is somewhat ambiguous in this regard and offers readers a variety of interpretive positions.

However, three notable attributes of the text can push one's interpretations of Emma more toward third wave feminism than post-feminism. First, the construction of the text's fictional world and Emma's actions within that construction reject the use of

feminine sexuality as a form of empowerment. Emma is presented as choosing to express her sexuality for the sake of herself rather than others. The men in her world seem to pay no attention at all to her revealing attire, with the exception of Scott, who shows interest in her body only when the two are alone and engaging in sexual behavior. Of course, in the real world, such a scenario is rather far-fetched, but this is not the case within the text's universe. It may be an unrealistically perfect situation, but it is the one in which her fictional choice is made. Emma also explicitly chooses to reject the idea of women using their bodies for attention. In "Dangerous" the team gathers around a television to watch the news coverage of their fight against a monster terrorizing New York City only to find that their story has been given one-sixth of the time devoted to a story about Paris Hilton. Emma complains to the television and her co-workers that the news should not cover in such detail "that useless tart dancing topless at a party," adding, "as if that's remotely remarkable" (2004-2005, p. 20). This scene further confirms that the X-Men men are enlightened and have less interest in women's bodies, including Emma's, than they have in women's minds and actions. Peter (Colossus), who has been in an underground laboratory for many years, inquires who the "Hilton girl" is, and Hank (Beast) responds, "It doesn't matter. On a lot of levels" (2004-2005, p. 20).

Like her appearance, Emma's actions and her perceptions of her world reject a strongly post-feminist construction in favor of one that is more third wave feminist. Bonnie Dow (1996) explains that one of the key factors of post-feminism is that feminist successes and individual ineptitude are sources of women's unhappiness instead of thriving patriarchy. For example, a post-feminist mother's attitude may appreciate

second wave feminism's success in allowing her to have a career, but any unhappiness she may feel from being stretched too thin between her work and family life stems from her personal inability to manage her time rather than a professional environment that refuses to accommodate a working mother and ignores a father's responsibility to his children. The post-feminist solution would inevitably be to reduce work responsibilities because while the women's movement was necessary and the hypothetical mother would not want to leave work altogether, she recognizes her inherent feminine maternity as the more important and more natural of her dual roles.

Falling in line with the X-Men's history, Emma points to her society's prejudice rather than individual ineptitude as the reason she cannot function "properly" within her culture. The X-Men were designed to represent discrimination and inequality in general. Mutants can stand in for any number of groups and can change groups between and even within individual texts. For example, the original X-Men were an allegory for racism and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent methods, which are referenced in Emma's opening speech in "Gifted." In turn, in the "cure" storyline in *Astonishing X-Men* a scientist has developed an injection that will "cure" the mutants of their abnormal genetic structure, following similar discourse to the idea of "curing" homosexuality. Emma remarks to the "cure's" inventor in the first volume, "Nothing but noble intentions. Yes, you're a veritable Oppenheimer. What's next? Eliminating the gay gene?" (2004, p. 113).

Emma's othering as a mutant is comparable to her othering as a woman, so the post-feminist equivalent would be to blame her separation from humanity on her superpowers and her inability to find an adequate way to work them into a normative

lifestyle. This, however, is certainly not what the text suggests. Emma expresses numerous times that the mutants as a group face systematic oppression and that she personally faces systematic oppression for being a member of that group. Her speech on the first day of school and her confrontation with the “cure’s” inventor are both examples of her rejection of that position. Another would be her confrontation of a former family friend in “Gifted” who has neglected to invite her to an event he hosted in the year that she publically revealed her mutantcy. As a further eschewal of power structures, Emma also asserts her freedom from Professor Xavier’s leadership. Helene Shugart (2009) singles out Professor Xavier and the X-Men as perhaps the best example of demographically diverse comic book superheroes upholding racism and sexism by serving the needs of rich white men. But in this particular *X-Men* series, Xavier is nowhere near the compound, and the X-men chastise him for ignoring Danger’s interests (which will be discussed in chapter three). Emma distances herself and her team from the former X-Men patriarch in “Gifted” by stating, “The professor isn’t running this team. And we’re not about to go whimpering to him for help at the first sign of crisis” (2004, p. 75). Emma, perhaps even more so than her male teammates, is clearly aware of the structures of her society that favor certain groups over others and explicitly rejects them, which works strongly against reading her as articulating a post-feminist position.

As a final thought on the subject, it would be difficult to argue that Emma’s discursive function is wrapped in consumerism, that she tries to sell beauty culture to girls, as Meenakshi Durham (2003) argues that Buffy and other postfeminist characters do. Her outfits vary little from day to day and do not adhere to any specific fashionable

style, and while she does wear what seems to be a lot of make-up, the pale blue lips similarly do not fit into popular fashion. It could perhaps be argued that Emma sells a form of sexual lifestyle since the audience is aware of her desirable body even when it remains unseen. Even if this is the case, her rejection of receiving attention for one's body, recognition of systematic oppression, and failure to align with any specific consumer culture make her, at the very least, far more successful in establishing a distinctly third wave feminist figure, as opposed to a post-feminist figure, than the vast majority of heroines.

EMMA'S STRUGGLES WITH HEROISM AND GENDER

A potentially feminist reading of any female hero is dependant upon her special abilities. In the hero world, metaphorical power within a society is expressed through superpower, and Emma's superpowers, not unlike her physique, are coded in gendered ways. Emma's primary superpower is her psychic ability. Among the most powerful telepaths in the world, Emma can enter into other people's mind to read their thoughts, force behaviors, and facilitate communication. This superpower is constructed as highly feminine, as it is designed to incorporate feminine values like cooperation and planning into combat. It also coincides with very little physical movement as well as with feminine relational style aggression that is carried out through emotional or psychological means as opposed to masculine physical means (Kosslyn & Rosenburg, 2005). Emma's secondary power is the ability to will her skin into a diamond casing. While diamonds are typically associated with femininity, an association that Emma points out in the fourth volume with her line, "I am, by definition, my own best friend" (2007-2008, p. 105),

within the context of the narrative, the outer shell is counterintuitively associated with masculinity. The third volume unveils that Emma's secondary mutation was jump-started by Cassandra Nova¹ in the deal that eventually leads Emma to facilitate an attack on her teammates. The impenetrable outer shell is associated with a lack of compassion due to its origins in the Hellfire Club and direct links to the back-stabbing ambush on the X-Men. Throughout the four *Astonishing X-Men* volumes, the amount of use Emma gets out of each power changes, and the rise and fall of Emma's femininity as constructed through her superpowers coincides with fluctuations in her control of her own life and effectiveness as a hero. The following detailed account of Emma's role in the narrative across all four volumes will explain the complexity of those fluctuations and the relationships between Emma's gender, feminism, and heroism.

In the first volume's two major altercations, Emma utilizes both her feminine psychic powers and her masculine diamond skin, the former with less frequency and more success, to take on supportive roles. In a hostage situation developed by Ord, an alien from the hyper-masculine Breakworld who commissioned the creation of the "cure" because a mutant was prophesied to destroy his planet, the villains all wear scramblers, technology that appears frequently in the Marvel universe and prevents psychics from reading the user's mind. This technology renders Emma's most valuable asset useless with very little effort, which does not sit well with the idea that her femininity is valued. However, the frequency with which this technology recurs in the Marvel universe functions to keep stories exciting. Without scramblers, it would be far too simple for telepaths to solve every problem by mentally forcing their opponents to cease whatever

actions they are taking against the heroes or victims of the situation. Contrary to the idea that Emma's feminine superpower is easily overcome, the mere need for a mechanism through which to eliminate mind-control as an ever-present solution indicates that the feminine trait is extraordinarily valuable.

With her telepathy rendered useless, Emma resorts to her diamond shield. Upon first entering, Emma punches a guard, but the effectiveness of her secondary power ends with that blow. Before the X-Men's arrival, Ord expressed fear toward Emma's psychic abilities, instructing his underlings to turn on their scramblers, but then he taunts her diamond skin, telling her that in the Breakworld members of his species "stuff [their] pillows with diamonds" (p. 41) and promptly throwing her through the floorboards. While she does jump into the fight early on, making a valiant heroic effort, her part in actually defeating the enemy and saving the hostages is quite small.

The second battle, which occurs in a laboratory as the X-Men attempt to steal the "cure" so that biologist Beast can study it, yields similar results. As the team (minus Kitty, who has gone on her own expedition in the building) discovers the body of a mutant they believe may have been killed in the process of the "cure's" creation, a psychic link with a set of telepath students informs Emma that severe danger is afoot at Xavier's School, at which point she demands that the team return home immediately. Unfortunately, it is at exactly that moment that security personnel burst into the room and start firing bullets. Emma is able to save herself, but Cyclops is shot. Emma diamonds up with fury in her eyes, but before she makes a move, Dr. Kavita Rao, the scientist in charge, runs in, castigating the guards for their hostility and ordering these guards to call

in medical professionals. Emma insists that Scott be healed by one of their own, and the women exchange choice words about the “cure.” While Beast confronts Dr. Rao about the mutant body the X-Men found, Emma is able to communicate with a newly conscious Scott and develop an escape plan—Scott and Logan [Wolverine] will break the scramblers, and Emma will psychically force the guards to leave; she also adds that for the rest of their lives, they will perform undesirable actions (vomiting) when they hear certain words, a relationally aggressive act designed for their humiliation and discomfort and involving no physical effort on Emma’s part. Ord thwarts one more time the X-Men’s escape, and he kidnaps a young mutant girl living at the lab. Colossus and Wolverine, the physically largest men on the team, capture Ord and rescue the girl, and the X-Men finally return home to find that Ord has “cured” one of the students against his will.

Throughout these battles, Emma is quick to choose her masculine power at the first sign that her feminine power, which is far stronger, will be ineffective. In contrast, however, the diamond skin does the heroine little good in “Gifted.” With the exception of the low-ranked helper she strikes at the beginning of the first attack, Emma is able to protect only herself and is unable to bring down her enemies or save innocent victims, making her actions correspond culturally with selfishness, not heroism. Her telepathy proves much more useful; it allows the team to develop plans in secret with their enemies in the room, and it defeats the guards in the laboratory with more long term damage than a physical attack could garner, considering that the X-Men, like many heroes, have a no killing policy. While the X-Men were ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the attack at

Xavier's School, Emma's psychic link was the best chance they had to do so and would likely have succeeded if uncontrollable circumstances had not interfered.

The events that unfold in Emma's personal life during "Gifted" provide insight as to the seemingly bizarre way that Emma jumps to her masculine power in spite of its inefficiency. While Emma is clearly made happy by her mutually respectful romantic relationship with co-team leader Scott (Cyclops), she feels that she always falls short of Jean Gray, Scott's ex-wife. Not only did the marriage come to a tragic and unsettling end, leaving Emma with thoughts that Scott may still be more in love with Jean than he is with Emma, but Jean was, like Emma, an extraordinarily powerful telepath, perhaps even more powerful. There is also tension within her role as teacher; for example, she follows a blunt explanation of the school's non-violence policy with a simulated attack. Simultaneously, she steps easily into a leadership position on the team but, unable to change her past or her icy cynical attitude, is subsequently accused of abusing her power to control Scott and the rest of the team.

Emma struggles with her femininity. She seems to be aware that feminine qualities are an asset to her, her teammates, and her students but feels inadequate and has difficulty putting feminine values into action. Femininity is a strategy that Emma must learn rather than an intrinsic part of herself that she must suppress to exhibit her masculinity, and, importantly, she must learn femininity in order to fully step into her role as a hero.

The feminine/hero connection and Emma's difficulty navigating that association are continued in "Dangerous." The second volume begins with a monster attacking New

York City, and the X-Men, later joined by the Fantastic Four, try to quell the beast. While Scott leads the physical attacks, Emma mentally manipulates the people in an office building in the vicinity of the ensuing battle, illustrated in a panel in which everyone thinks in unison, “I want to leave in a swift and orderly fashion” (2004-2005, p.15). It can be assumed that this effort was extremely effective as no civilian casualties are shown. Later that evening, the child whose mutant ability was erased by Ord commits suicide during a Danger Room simulation, granting the computer program autonomy. The Danger Room, who is presented as a god to machinery, sends a sentinel to attack the X-Men, luring Kitty and all the students into the room. During this time, Emma suffers a psychic attack, the source of which is unknown, and an unseen entity speaks to her telepathically. Emma wakes up just as the sentinel is destroyed and, finding that she can sense the Danger Room psychically, is able to piece together that the Danger Room has mutated into a life form and is attempting to kill Kitty and the students with training simulations.

Taking control of the team during the crisis, Emma authorizes Peter to tear apart the Danger Room’s intricate wiring and Hank to locate the machine’s “brain,” all the while staying mentally linked to what is happening inside the room. Wolverine smashes the “brain,” allowing the Danger Room to leave her entrapment and take a woman-esque form as Danger. Programmed to know their every move, Danger easily takes out each X-Man one by one, concluding with Emma. With Emma’s diamond shield adorned and her arm raised to punch, Danger whispers something in Emma’s ear, at which point Emma reverts to flesh and is knocked out by Danger.

Instead of completing her mission to kill the X-Men and students, Danger leaves the battle while all of her opponents are injured and in too poor of conditions to fight back, heading to Genosha to take on Professor Xavier. The X-Men follow and join the fight as soon as they arrive. Emma doubles over and clutches her head while her teammates fight, then leaves the battle while Scott calls out to her. Notably, she does not flee from the battle but walks calmly and coldly away from Scott and the rest of the X-Men. She enters a dark room and speaks to an unseen being who assures Emma that she will not have to “put up this pathetic façade for much longer” (2004-2005, p. 134). On the final page of the volume, the voice is revealed as Cassandra Nova’s as she sits among the Inner Circle of the Hellfire Club, Emma’s former villain cohort. Emma returns to her team in diamond form as the final blows are made and Danger is defeated. The team confronts Xavier with disgust as they realize that he had known that Danger was sentient for quite a while but kept her in a slave-like state in her room. Scott shows a similar disgust toward Emma for leaving her teammates during a fight, and his trust in her begins to fade.

In the beginning of this volume, Emma’s femininity and heroism have taken precedence in her actions. Her doubts about her romance and her conflicts with Kitty both remain unmentioned, and her utilization of her feminine psychic superpower is extremely effective in that it saves innocent civilians from certain death and provides the only insight anyone on the team is able to glean when they are confused about the cause and nature of Danger’s assaults. Moreover she is able efficiently and effectively to lead the team through the ordeal by thinking through the situation rather than jumping into

action, as Colossus does. As the volume continues, however, Emma's masculinity takes hold. Coinciding with her increased use of her diamond skin, which like before accomplishes little, Emma starts to neglect teamwork as a combative strategy in spite of its overwhelming success in taking down the monster early in the volume. Rather than take the heroic road and stand up to Danger in spite of her secretive threat, which the reader is led to believe relates to Emma's relationship with Cassandra Nova, Emma chooses to look out for herself, and she later physically abandons her teammates, compromising the trust she had earned from Scott by taking on feminine characteristics to become a better leader. Themes of submission begin to surface in "Dangerous" as well. Emma's selfishness and lack of heroism occur at times when she allows her actions to be ruled by Danger and by Cassandra.

The simultaneous movements toward masculinity and submission foreshadow Emma's downfall in "Torn." The first scene uncovers a deal made long ago between Cassandra and Emma. Cassandra will stimulate a secondary mutation in Emma, her diamond skin, in exchange for Cassandra's use of Emma and her mind to save Cassandra's consciousness from being trapped in a large slug-like creature by eventually freeing her then letting her assume a new host body. Cassandra tries to carry out the second part of this deal by forcing Emma to make her teammates face their deepest fears through a series of hallucinations and delusions. Kitty recognizes the psychic attack relatively early on and phases Emma into an underground chamber, but the hallucinations continue, with Kitty herself becoming a victim. While some X-Men's delusions are presented in a humorous light, like Wolverine's reversion to the perpetually frightened

boy he had been in the nineteenth century before he knew of his mutantcy, Cyclops' and Kitty's living nightmares are particularly horrific. Emma psychologically tortures Scott with sexual games involving his guilt and insecurities about Jean and Wolverine, with accusations that he is worthless to the X-Men, and with familial trauma from his childhood, all of which leave Scott a vegetable without his superpowers. Kitty is made to believe that she and Peter bare a son, who is then cruelly taken away by the X-Men, turning Kitty into maternal basket-case obsessed with rescuing her child at all costs. This particular attack frees the slimy thing that holds Cassandra's consciousness, as Kitty believes she is pulling her child, not the slug, out of a thick metal box.

As the X-Men each regain their sanity one at a time, the reader discovers that Emma, too, was the victim of an attack. The reestablished Hellfire Club that had been pushing Emma to turn on her team was a hallucination produced to ensure Emma's submission to Cassandra's entrance into her body. Kitty, furious not only about the severe emotional trauma she endured from the visions Emma gave her but about the principles of loyalty involved in the situation, prepares to shoot Emma. Scott explains this was Emma's plan all along—make sure that Kitty, who never trusted Emma, was part of the team so that when these events took place, she would kill Emma before the evil Cassandra could bring herself back into the world. Kitty casts the gun aside, as Scott assures Emma, who had been sitting motionlessly on the floor, that she still has a choice and can stop the situation from progressing. Emma looks up and says, “Go to hell” (2006-2007, p. 144), with art that makes the subject of that statement—Cassandra or Scott—ambiguous. The beginning of the fourth volume makes it clear that Emma was

talking to Cassandra and had prevented her from inhabiting Emma's body. In the final pages of the third volume, Ord and Danger, now partners, burst into the room in the midst of a battle with Armor, a young female student of Xavier's School, and everyone is teleported onto an aircraft headed to the Breakworld.

"Torn" places masculinity, lack of heroics, and submission into a strong association. For the first time in the series thus far, Emma becomes characterized entirely by submission. She follows orders from Cassandra Nova until the final few pages of the volume, and furthermore, Emma believes that she is following orders from the Hellfire Club as well. Little information is given about the Hellfire Club within this text, but a novice X-Men reader would be expected to know that the Club competed with Xavier's School to recruit mutants for its own training program which had nothing to do with saving the world or mutant equality and everything to do with making the group's leaders rich and powerful (Kitty was the subject of a particularly bitter recruiting competition). This means that from the X-Men's point of view the Hellfire Club qualifies as a villainous organization and that the club is characterized by constantly shifting hierarchies of power, as each member was defending his or her personal interests first and foremost.

The utter lack of loyalty and collaboration that the Hellfire Club connotes, and for that matter that Cassandra Nova promotes, aligns perfectly with a rejection of both femininity and heroism. While Emma's attack uses her feminine superpowers, the reason for the attack is grounded within her masculine superpower, which was designed by a heartless, compassionless figure. Along a similar line, the only way she is able to escape her submissive state is through encouragement from a teammate with whom she has

formed a close, interpersonal relationship to push her feminine psychic abilities to new heights. Kitty's gun cannot help Emma break free from Cassandra's grasp, but Scott's companionship can. In other words, the state of attacking and being under attack is characterized by a masculine rejection of interpersonal relationships and of a heroic role along with submission while Emma's ability to overcome the attacks and assert her heroism comes from regaining her agency by means of femininity.

Changes in Emma's appearance during the attack accent the above situation. While Emma is stuck underground, Cassandra forces Emma to project a hallucination of herself to her teammates in order to continue the illusion that Emma is the source of the attack. The false Emma refers to herself as the "White Queen," her former Hellfire Club moniker and appears in what resembles the kind of clothing Hellfire women wear. Still in all white, Emma dons a fur-topped cape that ties around her neck, a corset that laces up the front, low-rise panties, thigh-high boots, and long gloves. Counter-intuitively, a more masculine body accompanies the sexually revealing clothing. The corset transforms Emma's once curvy waist into an angular point, and her previously curvaceous hips are suddenly narrower, forming a straighter line from her waist to her knees. The costume also reveals increased muscular definition in her abdomen and legs. This sexier and more masculine Emma appears in relatively few frames, but her whole body is visible in a much higher percentage of these frames than has been established as normal for the real Emma. Furthermore, the new cape always flows behind Emma's body, never providing the shield to prevent gazes that her former cape had. Twice, Emma is presented so that the action of the scene stops with oversized frames that draw attention to the area

between her belly button and knees. The illusory image of Emma simultaneously removes her sexual agency and asserts her visual masculinity, and the fact that the image is meant to connote her membership in the Hellfire Club asserts Emma's supposed villainy and her rejection of trust, collaboration, and interpersonal relationships, feminine qualities that she had come to appreciate as an X-Man. But, of course, this is not really Emma but rather Cassandra's forced illusion of her. The very existence of this image is dependent upon Emma's subordination to a villainous leader.

Thus, between Emma's changing appearance and her narrative journey from hero to villain and back, the normally feminine qualities of passivity and submission are, within the specific structure of this text, assigned a masculine gender. These qualities are constructed with negative connotations, as obstacles that need to be overcome, and it is femininity that enables Emma to regain control and reject her masculinity and subordination, a clear abnormality of traditional American gender value systems that works to restructure them.

With her reinvigorated belief in the qualities of companionship and cooperation, the version of Emma that appears in "Unstoppable" is the most feminine and successfully heroic. The volume begins with brief exposition of the Breakworld, explaining that it functions within a culture of extreme violence and constant war. In one scene, a ritual is performed in which a baby is placed in a boat-like vessel and sent sailing across the sky toward a series of lasers. According to this ritual, only those babies who make it safely across the canyon pass the trial while the others, including the infant in the scene, are

instantly obliterated. The woman who sends the baby out, Aghanne, expresses that she is beginning to question her society's contempt for compassion and sympathy.

Although physically weakened from her ordeal with Cassandra Nova, Emma soon begins acting like herself, quipping insults at the government agent who kidnapped them. The Breakworld built a missile that is aimed toward Earth, and the X-Men's mission is to dismantle it, then find a way to convince the Breakworld's leader Kruun that the prophecy of Colossus destroying the Breakworld is not true. If they are unsuccessful in the latter part of the plan, then the X-Men are to see to it that prophecy is fulfilled. The team crash-lands on the alien planet, extinguishing the plan to stay undetected until the missile is dismantled, and finds the infamous prophecy—a very explicit stone carving of Colossus crushing the Breakworld with one hand and holding a fireball in the other. Kitty and Peter, who had been separated from the group in the crash, find refuge in Aghanne's home, while Danger offers her services to Kruun. The rest of the team decides to split up.

Scott and Emma form a team, and, in the midst of working together to fly an aircraft being chased by the species of the Breakworld, Scott tells Emma that he loves her. Danger attacks the two, rendering Scott unconscious. Emma challenges Danger. Emma has reasoned that Danger has yet to kill anybody because she was programmed always to stop short of doing so. Her bluff having been called, Danger agrees to join forces with the X-Men in exchange for Xavier, a promise that, at the conclusion of the series, has yet to be fulfilled with no discussion of when and if Emma plans on actually delivering her end of the bargain.

The groups eventually meet up again and find the missile's base. Aware that their ship has been bugged, the team develops a decoy plan for Kruun to hear while Emma telepathically facilitates a second conversation with the real plan, which she helps to form without dominating her teammates. After overpowering and kidnapping Kruun to use as a bargaining chip, the team again splits.

Emma, Scott, and Peter head off to talk to the Breakworld's rulers with Aghanne acting as a culture specialist, but the group struggles to develop an effective plan for dealing with a hyper-violent culture. The rest of the team, including Danger, head to the missile so that Kitty can phase into it and use her technological expertise to dismantle the weapon. Emma keeps the lines of communication open between the groups with her superpower. Emma's team discovers that Aghanne fabricated the prophecy due to her growing belief that the Breakworld would be better nonexistent than it would be existing in its current state, and Colossus eventually prevails in forcing the new rulers to abandon their plans to destroy the Earth. Meanwhile, Kitty has discovered that what the team thought was a missile was actually a bullet, which is fired with Kitty inside. The Breakworld metal that forms the bullet weakens Kitty. She knows she will be unable to phase back out of the bullet, so instead she phases the bullet through the Earth, saving the world but forcing herself to continue hurdling through space with no way to ever stop. While she is still within a close enough range, Emma commends Kitty for her utterly selfless and heroic sacrifice. The series ends with each team member coping with the loss of their friend and with Scott and Emma more grateful for each other than ever.

The fourth volume concludes Emma's story arch with her femininity finally being utilized to its fullest. Rather than a villain who is feminized, the Breakworld is masculinized to a sickening degree, a place where "murder is honor" and "children nurse on the blood of the weak" (2007-2008, p.159). Emma's strategy for defeating the leaders of this culture is femininity. The team develops the most intricate plan of the series, and Emma is the key factor whose psychic communication skills allow for the production and execution of the scheme. Meanwhile, her tumultuous personal relationships finally become solidified as she becomes able to accept Scott's love and appreciate Kitty's contributions to the team and to the world. With Emma's femininity stable and without losing the defining factors of her character (her sharp tongue, intimidating demeanor, etc.), the heroine becomes a leader who is not questioned by her team and becomes a hero who is concerned with the fate of the world rather than her own well-being.

THIRD WAVE FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND GENDER VALUE

Emma's transitions in the four volumes of *Astonishing X-Men* comics from struggling with her gender in "Gifted" and "Dangerous," to masculinity in "Torn," to femininity in "Unstoppable," in combination with her journey from autonomy to submission to cooperative autonomy redefine attributes of gender. Submission moves from the realm of femininity to that of masculinity, marking femininity as useful in gaining and asserting power. Adding heroism as a factor in this unusual gender definition makes it a powerful tool in critiquing normative values assigned to gender and the patriarchy that created the value system. If heroes are the emblem toward which the citizens of a culture should strive, and if heroes' actions define what is "right" in a

society, then constructing a character whose effectiveness as a hero increases exponentially with her use of femininity assigns feminine gender qualities a positive value.

Taking this point further, the feminine attributes that Emma must learn how to perform and/or learn when and how to use efficiently—communication, collaboration, cooperation, relational aggression, and interpersonal relationships—are oppositional to the masculine qualities that are valued in patriarchal Western cultures as necessary for victory in competitive fields, like a lack of compassion for the weak and focus on individual needs. These narrative elements work stringently against the patriarchy within these important societal sites rather than molding women and femininity into those systems without questioning their structure.

This particular text carefully constructs Emma's character with a combination of masculine and feminine appearances and shifting mindsets, which rejects gender essentialism, and with sexual agency and recognition of the systems of power that oppress her, which rejects a post-feminist viewpoint. Thus, Emma Frost is constructed as third wave feminist figure, and through her, Whedon and Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* can be understood as a third wave feminist text, an extremely important anomaly in a medium that has historically been criticized for its sexism. Emma is featured as a powerful woman and a hero in a text that subverts patriarchy by questioning the system of values that codes gender within it. With hero narratives acting as a site in which cultural values are constructed, this text at the very least confirms that historically sexist

genres can be reworked against patriarchy and at best may signify a transition in comic books toward a more progressive stance about women's and femininity's roles in society.

Footnote

¹For those who are unfamiliar with the character, Cassandra Nova has a reputation as one of the most treacherous villains the X-Men have ever faced. She is a mummudrai, a disembodied parasitic lifeform born on the astral plane. Cassandra was able to create a body for herself and become a powerful telepath by feeding off of Charles Xavier, essentially making herself his evil twin. Cassandra is best known for initiating genocide in Genosha, the mutant homeland that frequently functioned as an allegory for South African Apartheid, and for attempting to use Xavier's machine Cerebra to kill every mutant on earth. During the second ordeal, Emma tricks Cassandra into entering the alien matter known as "stuff" from which she emerges in "Torn."

Chapter 2: Kitty Pryde and Emma Frost's Antagonistic Partnership and Third Wave Feminism

One of the most important concepts of third wave feminism is that of difference. Third wave ideologies emerged from feminists whose differences caused them to feel unrepresented by their second wave sisters whose perspectives skewed vastly white, middle-class, and heterosexual (Flynn, 1997; Foss & Foss, 2009; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007). As explained in the introduction, recognition that a person cannot be defined by a singular trait marks third wave feminist ideologies. Contradiction and complexity in people (and in media representations) are inescapable (Heywood & Drake, 1997).

While many more people are invited to explore feminism via third wave ideologies, the growing diversity causes the very definition of feminism to become more muddled, making its analysis increasingly complicated. As one would expect, dissimilar experiences among women mean dissimilar opinions about what feminism is and what its goals should be. Following in the steps of lesbian, women-of-color, working class, and other feminists who proclaimed that all kinds of feminists deserve to have their voices heard and needs met, third wave feminists face the arduous task of needing to have “conversations about what our feminisms are, how we define them, and how they will move us forward in the world” (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p. 2) while simultaneously piecing together that “us” from many heterogeneous groups who do not always share the same interests. The complexity of the situation is apparent in media texts and the way that feminists analyze them, as evidenced by debates about what kinds of feminist

messages exist in popular texts like *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and to whom such messages apply, if the texts can be labeled as feminist at all (Anderson & Stewart, 2005; Gerhard, 2005; Lotz, 2006; Moseley & Read, 2002).

Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* takes a particular approach to tenants of diversity which I believe mark the text with third wave feminism. As explained in Chapter One, Emma Frost can be read as third wave feminist character who embraces sexuality for her own sake, eschews essentialism, and fulfills her role as hero by utilizing a learned femininity. Examining Emma and her female teammate Kitty Pryde as foils to each other further enhances readings of the text as potential third wave feminism by putting two characters with directly oppositional characteristics in conversation with each other. Both approaches to life are presented as flawed but valid. Each character's characteristics are at times detrimental to the woman who embodies them and frequently are viewed as oppressive by her female coworker, but these same characteristics allow the women to work through their problems and move on with their lives. Rather than sugar-coating the narrative into an idealistic tale of coworkers becoming unlikely friends, the two characters come to respect their mutual political goals but maintain their conflicts when they leave the battlefield. While it may seem paradoxical to promote accepting differences through an antagonistic relationship, I believe that Kitty and Emma are able to do exactly that.

In order to examine how Kitty and Emma's relationship functions in the text, this chapter will begin with a discussion of themes and patterns regarding women's relationships in media. Following this, I will explain how Kitty's gender shifts between

femininity and masculinity in *Astonishing X-Men* as well as how she is presented as preferring her feminine qualities over her masculine qualities. I will continue by examining the interactions between Emma and Kitty, drawing parallels between both characters' falls from and subsequent returns to heroism and exploring how these heroic shifts help the women establish a relationship of both personal disapproval and political respect. The chapter will conclude with a suggestion that the type of relationship between Kitty and Emma may contribute to a third wave feminist interpretation of the text.

WOMEN'S ANTAGONISM, FRIENDSHIPS, AND PARTNERSHIPS IN MEDIA

Antagonistic relationships between women in literature, film, and other media have a long history of articulating ideologies regarding women's "proper" roles and behaviors. Relatively recently, such texts have become key to post-feminist ideology by constructing women in traditionally feminine roles against women who choose more masculine roles, often revolving around clashes between the home and the workplace (Douglas, 1994; Dow, 2006). In such texts, the source of a woman's oppression is shifted away from a sexist culture (and its sexist institutions) and people who maintain it to personal decisions deemed poor because they cannot make up for conditions that were already problematic (Douglas, 1994; Dow, 2006; Hollinger, 1998). If, for example, a working mother is miserably over-tired, it is because she chose to take on working in addition to her maternal duties and not because the working father is not expected to take a larger role in parenting or because affordable quality childcare is unavailable.

These conflicts are represented in films like *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which the villainess is driven to madness by her lack of domestic fulfillment, or *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), in which hiring a nanny constitutes life-threatening neglect (Dow, 2006; Hollinger, 1998). This is not to say that all texts featuring woman-against-woman themes are completely without merit; *Mean Girls* (2004), for example, addresses and even chastises relational aggression among girls, which is a very real problem (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, Werner, Casas, O'Brien, Nelson, Grotpeter, & Markson, 1999; Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001; Murray-Close & Crick, 2006). The common thread, however progressive or regressive each individual text may be, is that other women, even those who may pretend to be a friend, are not to be trusted. Patriarchal understandings of women's relationships heavily influence this recurring concept as evidenced through a misogynist construction of women as intrinsically underhanded and the narrative need for women to rely on naturally trustworthy men, all of which is quite troublesome to a feminist framework (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Charbonneau & Winer, 1981; Douglas, 1994; Dow, 2006; Hollinger, 1998). Furthermore, the structure of texts that revolve around women's conflicts with few exceptions present a clear winner and a loser which privileges one particular viewpoint over another. If the purpose of the text is to promote one viewpoint and deride another, whatever they may be, then this structure can be a useful tool to a producer. Nonetheless, this arrangement is problematic from a third wave feminist viewpoint, which endorses understanding between women that "what oppresses you may

be something that I participate in, and what oppresses me may be something that you participate in” (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 3).

Given the issues that antagonistic women present, women’s friendship films and similar texts in other media may seem like effective modes of featuring multiple women through a more feminist framework, and in some cases they are. Karen Hollinger (1998) describes these texts as alternatives to the male buddy film, instead usually falling into the so-called “women’s film” genre, which she identifies as being directed toward a female audience with plots that center on the actions and emotions of female protagonists as they deal with issues pertinent to women.

Of particular interest to a third wave feminist agenda are what Hollinger (1998) refers to as “political friendship” films, which are the closest of all types of friendship films to a female-centric equivalent of action/adventure male buddy movies. Political female friendships are formed around a shared sociopolitical goal instead of a deep emotional connection, with the central friendship becoming solidified over the course of sociopolitical action (Todd, 1980). Hollinger (1998) identifies *Nine to Five* (1980) as a prime example. The film features three women of different backgrounds who bond over their shared hatred of their sexist boss. The women scheme to kidnap him and are rewarded for the progressive office policies they establish in his absence. The women’s friendship is not notably intimate, as their status as co-workers defines their relationship and they know little about each others’ personal lives. However it is one marked by deep loyalty to each other due to each woman’s passion for eradicating the rampant sexism of the business world. Political friendship films in the 1990s followed similar themes but

were less humorous and more violent. Many of these darker films, like *Girls Town* (1996), were produced and released independently, and those that came from mainstream Hollywood, like *Thelma and Louise* (1992), frequently became the subject of a great deal of controversy in popular discourse (Hollinger, 1998).

Unlike the political friendship films described above, the vast majority of friendship films revolve around purely social and empathetic relationships. While such texts can certainly promote the acceptance of differences between women, they can also discourage political action by presenting the characters on the screen as well as their audience with friendship as a mechanism for simply feeling better about their second class-status in lieu of sociopolitical action to change the circumstances that caused their second-class status (Hollinger, 1998; O'Connor, 1992). Hollinger (1998) sites *Steel Magnolias* (1989) as an example, in that it celebrates friendship as a way to cope with the pain and sadness that comes from sacrificial motherhood but never questions the role of the mother or the need for sacrifice. In her analysis of *Crush* (1992), Suzy Gordon (2007) further suggests that idealizations of friendship that completely deny the existence of aggression and violent urges within them may be equally as or more destructive and dangerous than those constructed as purely antagonistic.

The relationship between Kitty and Emma in *Astonishing X-Men* bares strong influence from political friendship films but very little resemblance to their sentimental cousins. The comics only partially fulfill Hollinger's (1998) criteria for a women's text. They fall much more easily into the action/adventure genre of the male buddy film, but they also rely heavily upon both female and male protagonists' emotions to drive the

narrative forward. The comic book audience is notoriously male dominated, but the sociopolitical themes of inequality surrounding the X-Men are pertinent to any group of people who fall somehow outside the norms of society. With Kitty and Emma (as well as Danger, Cassandra Nova, Aghanne, Hisako, and Agent Brand) each playing such important roles in this particular set of X-Men comics, issues pertinent to women are central to the text regardless of who the intended and actual audiences are.

With this atypical structure in mind, the *Astonishing X-Men* series is a unique take on the political friendship narrative in that Kitty and Emma never become friends. Just as in a political friendship, the female protagonists have oppositional approaches to life and values, but rather than learning to love each other for their differences and developing loyalty to one another, the women learn to respect each other for their loyalty to a mutual sociopolitical cause. This allows the text not only to avoid the complications of idealism and apoliticism found in other female friendships but also provides an avenue for each character's version of feminism to be presented as problematic and as valuable.

KITTY'S BODY AND APPEARANCE

One of the most obvious sites of difference between Kitty and Emma is the constructions of their bodies. As explained in detail in the previous chapter, Emma's body is composed almost entirely of curved lines, giving her an extraordinarily feminine appearance. The only exception is her face, which uses straighter lines to create a pointed look and add a cold, masculine feel to her expressions. Emma is also depicted in tight, revealing clothes that are often covered by a cape, which pulls her sexuality to the forefront of her character while simultaneously subverting the potential for sexual gazes.

Kitty is visually constructed as Emma's direct opposite in all accounts. Kitty's civilian clothing features oversized garments or, more frequently, long pants and jackets or cardigans, which not only are composed of mostly straight lines but also hide her hips and breasts when viewed from the front. When viewed from the side, the lines are again noticeably straight, with Kitty's, admittedly ample, breasts making a lone curve from the rectangular clothing. The straight lines and layers are somewhat reminiscent of apparel associated with women's fight for equality in the 1970s and 1980s, like the power suit, which used straight lines and sharp angles to make the wearer seem powerful and visible. Kitty's jackets, like Emma's cape, prevent objectifying gaze by covering her feminine curves but do so by means similar to the power suit, by creating the illusion that the female body underneath looks similar to the male bodies typically associated with power and status. From the audience's point of view, Kitty's clothing constructs her body in a clearly masculine way.

Interestingly, this does not match the viewpoint of the character. As explained in the first chapter, the men with whom Kitty works are enlightened enough to treat her as an equal and at no point objectify her body or the bodies of any other women in the text, negating the need for an illusion of power or importance created through clothing. Furthermore, as will be explained later in this chapter, Kitty sees her feminine qualities as her most valuable assets, reserving violent and forceful methods for when her people skills and defensive methods fail. In fact, while her teammates and the audience are overtly aware of just how powerful and forceful she can be, Kitty seems to think of herself as a humble assistant. This disconnect between what Kitty wears and how she

acts builds the idea that her quiet, defensive, and people-oriented skills hold great power, which helps to establish equality between her and Emma, whose leadership position and potent superpowers make her authority more obvious. In other words, Kitty's clothing helps to keep her from slipping into the background, something that the narrative makes clear is not the text's intent.

Kitty's X-Men uniform, like her civilian clothing, manipulates her obviously female body to decrease femininity. The long-sleeved and long-panted unitard with large gloves and calf-high boots covers the entirety of her body up to her neck, which, as explained in the introduction, is rather modest in comparison to those of other Marvel females in general (Marvel, 2006). The outfit is black with a bright yellow triangle starting across Kitty's shoulders and ending at a point near her crotch in the front and back. The over-sized gloves match the yellow on her torso, her boots are black, and a yellow belt with an X-shaped buckle sits around her hips.

Obviously, a pattern that essentially makes a giant arrow toward Kitty's crotch is somewhat concerning and was likely chosen because it is similar to other variations in her costume over the course of her entire run. This version, however, does help to downplay potential objectification that the triangle may cause. The contrast of bright yellow against black (as opposed to the red or blue that appear on some of her teammates' costumes) serves to pull the viewers' eyes up toward Kitty's shoulders. Furthermore, the framing of the panels and the visualization of her superpower, which allows her to move through solid objects, frequently conceal the lower half of her torso from view.

The form-fitting uniform reveals details of the shape of Kitty's body that are hidden in her civilian clothes. The line from her underarm to her waist is a straight one pointing diagonally inward as it descends, and the curvature of her hips imply a stroke downward rather than outward. The result is a long, lean body with a waist defined by a point rather than a curve. A long black line distinguishes the definition of Kitty's breasts, and the line is only visible on the yellow part of her uniform. Similarly, when her arms are not raised, the black of her torso and arms bleed together, rendering the slight curvature created by the outside of her breasts invisible. These black-against-black artistic techniques also reduce the definition in her buttocks. Thus, in direct opposition to Emma's highly curvaceous form, Kitty's body is presented as rather masculine, or at the very least, not feminine.

Like Emma, Kitty's face is constructed as antithetical to her body. Kitty's cheekbones curve widely outward, and her chin slopes gently with a relatively wide stroke. Her nose is shorter than Emma's from eye to mouth but curves more prominently forward, and her curvy eyebrows form a much softer, more horizontal arch than the harsh slope of generically masculine eyebrows (Lee & Buscema, 1978). In contrast to her masculine body, then, Kitty's face, the site of her expression of emotion, projects femininity and, I believe, reflects a feminine attitude expressed through her words (an idea which I will expand upon subsequently).

KITTY'S GENDERED SUPERPOER, ABILITIES, AND BEHAVIOR

In terms of gender, Kitty's superpowers are ambiguous. Her primary power is referred to as "phasing" and is explained as the ability to manipulate atoms. When Kitty

phases, she is able to pass through solid matter, and she can choose to grant the same power to any person or object she touches. Most frequently in the text, Kitty's phasing is a feminine superpower that allows for defensive protection by allowing her to remove herself or others from danger, as opposed to offensive protection by defeating the source of danger. For example, in "Gifted" she phases hostages through the floor to safety, and in "Dangerous" she phases all of her teammates through a massive explosion. This same power, however, can take a masculine form through physical aggression when Kitty phases her fist or an object into an enemy and then solidifies, causing very serious damage by incredibly painful means. A final use for her power is exploration. In "Gifted," for example, Kitty is able to phase into an underground laboratory where she finds and rescues Peter who was previously thought to be dead. The concept of exploration through space might fall on the masculine end of the gender spectrum, but compared to the other common use of her powers, this one is relatively gender neutral. Adding to this neutrality, the exploration function of phasing is based on achieving access to all areas, meaning that Kitty can easily move through walls that symbolically separate the public and private sphere.

Aside from her superpowers, Kitty has gendered talents and areas of expertise that pertain to her role as a hero but that within the narrative do not result from the mutant gene. On the feminine side, she has an inexplicable psychic connection to Lockheed, a dragon-like alien, and on the masculine side, she is a highly skilled martial artist and a computer expert. Thus, constructed in opposition to Emma's two superpowers that are

distinctly feminine and masculine, Kitty's hodgepodge of skills and ambiguous superpower provide an avenue to adapt her gendering to the situation at hand.

Fitting with the idea that her adaptability is a natural part of her superhero biology, Kitty seems to be completely aware that her ability to move constantly along the gender spectrum is an asset to her, and she absolutely embraces it. This is not to say that she is confused about her identity or is unsure of her preferences. Early in the first volume, Scott gathers the newly formed team to discuss their goals in the fight for mutant rights and the methods each member needs to take in combat. Kitty points out that she is "not a fighter, like you guys" (2004, p. 16), revealing her preference for the feminine, non-violent uses of her power and skills. Scott explains that this preference is, in fact, her greatest value to the team, as the public sees Hank as a beast, Emma as a villain, Logan as a thug, and quite literally cannot look Scott in the eye. Kitty's sweet, feminine demeanor changes in an instant when she stands up for herself to ensure that she is not being used or manipulated by bluntly and angrily asking Scott if she is just "a P.R. stunt" (2004, p. 17).

Aside from stating her preference, Kitty is frequently painted in a maternal light. For example, when she first discovers Peter in "Gifted," he drops to his knees and buries his tearful eyes into her torso while she reaches down gently to embrace him with clear mother-child imagery. In the same volume, she carries out her role as student liaison and counselor by consoling a student who is worried by the "cure" for the mutant gene. Not only is she more connected with the children at the school than any of her teammates are, but her kind attitude and "everything will be okay" type of response stands in contrast to

Emma's heartless speech to the students just two issues prior, in which she states that mutants will always be hated by humans. Kitty seems to have no qualms about taking on maternal roles, and she performs the feminine and gender-neutral sides of her powers effortlessly.

In contrast, taking on more masculine tasks, although she does so effectively, seems to make her ill at ease. In "Dangerous," for example, Kitty's attempts to lead the student body to safety during an attack forces her to be their leader in combat when they become the sentient Danger Room's victims. Unlike in the previous volume when she phased hostages out of a building, this new role does not come naturally, and she must take a moment to collect her bearings and reassure herself. "Unstoppable" provides another example. When government official Agent Brand kidnaps the X-Men onto a spacecraft and promptly contains them, Kitty, who is the lone team member still free, forces Brand to let everyone go by threatening to phase a gun into Brand's head. The threat is successful, but the beads of sweat and countenance on Kitty's face reveal her discomfort with making it. Kitty is thus constructed as a character that understands herself well. She values her femininity, recognizes its power to help her team, and treats it as a default setting, but she also does not hesitate to leave the comfort of her familiar feminine values and to embrace the masculine possibilities of herself when such a method is more effective for dealing with the specific situation at hand.

KITTY AND EMMA AS ANTAGONISTIC PARTNERS

Given Emma's struggle to learn to accept the power of her femininity as well as her sexualized wardrobe, as explained in chapter one, Kitty and Emma's complete

disapproval with each other is not surprising in the least, and this disapproval is made quite explicit. For example, the first time that Kitty and Emma meet in “Gifted,” Emma is in the midst of her welcoming speech to the students at Xavier’s School when Kitty phases into the room behind her. Emma tries to embarrass Kitty, saying, “This, children, is Kitty Pryde, who apparently feels the need to make a grand entrance,” to which Kitty replies, “I’m sorry. I was busy remembering to put on all my clothes” (2004, p. 6). This comment not only expresses Kitty’s clear disapproval of Emma’s choice to expose her body, but it seems to be intended to embarrass Emma right back, as it draws reference to the even more revealing clothing that Emma wore as a villain. In the same volume, Emma admits that she requested Kitty be a part of the team because she knew that Kitty did not trust her and would not let her step too far out of line. Emma explains, “Being an X-Man means a lot to me, but it doesn’t always agree with me” (2004, p. 43). Kitty replies, “The first time I ever met the X-Men, the first day...they were ambushed. And captured. And caged. By you...When I think of evil, whenever I think about the concept of evil, yours is the face I see” (2004, p. 44). In “Unstoppable” Kitty approaches Emma after the team must abandon Scott with their Breakworld enemies, asking if Emma wants to talk. Emma sarcastically responds, “Oh yes, let’s talk—let’s share our feelings and have slumber parties and try on hats. You understand me so terribly well” (2007-2008, p. 101). As a final example of their enmity, the following exchange from the first volume takes place when Emma comments to Kitty and Logan that the availability of the “cure” caused several students’ absence from her ethics class:

Kitty: Oh my God. You teach ethics?

Emma: Yes, do let's make jokes right now.

Kitty: I'm not joking. I have a very large problem with that concept.

Emma: Our students are fleeing the school, you half-wit.

Kitty: Well, maybe it's time for another peppy 'they will always hate us' speech.

I'm sure that helped. (2004, p. 56).

As these examples illustrate, Kitty's and Emma's mutual condemnation for each other spans a variety of topics from fashion to the students' welfare to the team's methods, and these conflicts run to very core of each character's system of values. Kitty's hopeful, nurturing spirit inevitably favors feminine attributes, like community, reason, and non-violence, as the keys to social change for mutantkind while Emma's cold, jaded, more masculine worldview directs her focus toward force with a constant wariness of humans.

One of the most unusual aspects of this particular antagonistic relationship is that the demographic categories that are often used to define difference do not separate the two characters. Both are white. Both are relatively young, and although Emma was a young adult when Kitty was recruited to the X-Men as a young teen, the text gives no indication that there was a significant generational shift in discourse about mutants during that time frame. Similarly, Kitty's Jewish upbringing and superior intellect, aspects of her character which are very well-known to Marvel readers, are never mentioned in the text, nor do they cause substantial differences between her and any other teammate. Both characters had upper-middle-class families in the northern United States, and both are involved in committed heterosexual relationships with a teammate. At that, each

relationship is portrayed as mutually respectful and enriching to each partner's life, but Kitty and Emma both have personal reservations that they work to overcome during the narrative.

The only major differences between the two characters is that Kitty's home life as a child was happy and healthy and that she was trained at Xavier's School in her teens, a place which emphasized passive resistance and heroism as means to social change, while Emma had a tumultuous home life and subsequently joined the Hellfire Club, an organization which emphasized personal survival, even at the cost of one's own kind. Logically, these differences are the most likely source of Kitty's and Emma's contrasting worldviews. On the one hand, the addition of racial, socioeconomic, sexual, or other difference could certainly create complications in the text, and an argument that the normativity of the characters is problematic for a reading through the lens of a type of feminism founded upon issues of exclusivity could be a valid one worth exploring in subsequent research. On the other hand, the exclusion of diversity between the characters indicates that even demographically similar people may have deep and important differences, and the simplification of excluding demographic differences can be useful for this particular text by narrowing the potential sources of systematic oppression.

With this simplification it becomes important that this text is one of superheroes. The genre is incredibly useful for discussing oppression because a good versus evil conflict is built in; even in a revisionary hero narrative like *Astonishing X-Men* in which the heroes can not always be trusted and the villains are at times held in sympathetic light, the audience knows to identify with the X-Men (Klock, 2002). The one string that

has held together all X-Men comics in all titles throughout their almost fifty year run is that the X-Men use their mutant powers to prove that they are valuable to society in an attempt to change that society to include them. As opposed to other mutant groups who try to escape the rest of the world or try to rule it, the X-Men use heroism as a form of resistance and a means to social change. When the team in Whedon and Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* comics fight Ord, the "cure," Cassandra Nova, the Breakworld leaders, or any other of the villains that appear within the four volumes, they are fighting the institutions which bar them from membership in their society.

For Kitty and Emma, successfully fulfilling a hero role means working actively against systematic sociopolitical oppression, as this activism is not only their goal within the narrative but historically has been the purpose of X-Men comics (Lee, 1974). This format establishes two crucial elements to understanding Kitty and Emma's relationship. First, the two characters always share a common enemy, and second, their ability to be heroes measures their commitment to a social cause. Viewed through a feminist lens, the women's oppression can always be traced back to an institutional source that works against them both in spite of their differences, and their heroism is an expression of their ability to be feminists.

Kitty and Emma do not mince words about their feelings for each other's choices, and it is clear that each finds the other's heroic methods to be detrimental, even to the point of increasing the mutants' oppression. However, the characters never chastise each other on the battlefield. That is, while the women argue about how to fight, they never argue about whom to fight. Off the battlefield each woman questions everything about

the other, but on the battlefield, they are partners in social change, never blaming each other for oppression and always standing together.¹

Building upon the construction of an antagonistic partnership as a political relationship without friendship, neither woman's lifestyle is privileged over the other's. Both characters face pitfalls that occur in part because of the specific choices they have made, but the serial nature of the medium allows the audience to see the women pick up the pieces of their lives, often using the same characteristics that caused the problem in the first place, and move on. And over the course of persevering through these problems, Kitty and Emma learn to respect each other for their commitment to their shared cause without becoming friends.

As explained in chapter one, Emma's struggle with gender mirrors her struggle to overcome her villainous past. In "Torn" this parallel rears its particularly ugly head when powerful telepath Cassandra Nova reappears in Emma's life. Cassandra attempts to free her consciousness from its prison in the school's basement by forcing Emma to psychically attack all of the members of the current X-Men team. This low point for Emma is able to be carried out because Cassandra identifies Emma's instability as her weakness. Early in the volume is an event that apparently took place prior to the beginning of the *Astonishing X-Men* story. Cassandra offers Emma a deal: Cassandra will stimulate Emma's secondary mutation, her diamond skin, to give her a method of protection and to allow her to survive Cassandra's upcoming attack on Genosha (a supposed safe haven for mutants that functioned at the time of publication as an allegory for Apartheid), and in return Cassandra will be allowed to plant a tiny seed of

consciousness into Emma's brain that will eventually force Emma to free Cassandra from the imprisonment she knows is inevitable. As the story continues, it is not entirely clear whether the event actually occurred or whether the tiny fragment of Cassandra that has been lying in wait within Emma simply makes Emma believe that it happened. Either way, Cassandra's words during the exchange hit the core of Emma's downfall.

Cassandra calls Emma a "predator" who "at the end of the day...will always do what's best for [Emma]" (p. 4). Emma persists that it is possible that she could stop Cassandra from taking over her mind, but Cassandra pushes back that Emma is far too weak to overcome her own true nature, one that will always be evil whether Emma likes it or not. Cassandra finally goes on to predict the tragedy in Genosha, saying, "They're all going to die, Emma. Millions, in minutes. No warning, no escape—and you're going to be right in the middle of it" (2006-2007, p. 3). Emma's guilt over surviving the destruction of Genosha, the masculine, dog-eat-dog decisions she made as a villain, and her lack of confidence that she has changed or even can change are the very qualities that Cassandra Nova uses as weapons against Emma and thus are the reasons she temporarily descends from her position as hero. It is the cold, selfish, heartless life with which Emma struggles, the defining gendered aspects of her character, that bring her temporary downfall.

It is precisely her default masculine qualities, however, that when balanced with her learned femininity provide Emma a path back to heroism. As Emma is confronted with compassion from Scott and cruelty from Cassandra, she must choose between their conflicting voices swirling in her head. Picking Scott and the X-Men undoubtedly

reflects an amount of femininity on Emma's part, as she yields to the encouragement that stems from a loving relationship. However, her decision also reflects an embrace of the masculine traits that brought on her problem in the first place. Her denial of Cassandra's orders means that she has gone back on a deal after receiving her part of it but before delivering on her promise. Her phrasing of her decision is crass, and her actions simultaneously work for her own selfish protection and for the betterment of mutantkind. As the narrative progresses past the entire incident and moves onto a new villain and a new problem, Emma remains unfazed. Though initially a bit guilty because she strayed from the larger social cause, Emma quickly returns to her heroine status in just the same way that she performed it before. In fact, as chapter one argues, it is in the final volume, which is just after the ordeal, that Emma becomes the most effective form of her herself in terms of her ability to be a heroine.

Kitty's fall from heroism results from the same event. Honing in on Kitty's maternal, nurturing nature and fear of abandonment, Cassandra's attack on Kitty via Emma makes Kitty believe that three years of her life go by in which she and Peter have a son who is taken away by the other X-Men and placed in a metal box in the basement, with Peter leading the assault. Kitty becomes what Lisa Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti (2006) call the "monstrous maternal," a woman driven to abusive madness by her obsessive need to indulge her maternal instincts. During the hallucination, Kitty, who had previously criticized Emma for plans that involve elitist attitudes or unnecessary death, threatens to murder Peter and denies him humanity, calling him a robot and telling him the baby is hers, not his. Believing she is rescuing her son, she phases her arms into

a metal box and pulls out a toddler-sized slug-like alien mass that holds Cassandra's consciousness. In a visualization of the monstrous maternal, Kitty stands hunched over the dripping creature with her face sweaty, hair ragged, and eyes blank, saying, "I saved our son" (2006-2007, p. 121).

When she and her teammates break away from the nightmare world and piece together what has happened, Kitty becomes furious with Emma, a feeling that is exacerbated by the fact that Kitty must then rescue Emma from an underground chamber to have any hope of stopping Cassandra from finding a new host. Blaming Emma for the illusions rather than Cassandra and doubting Emma's ability to overcome Cassandra's influence, Kitty grabs a nearby gun and aims for Emma's temple. This is the moment that Kitty loses her heroism. After a downward spiral in which her maternal nature is exaggerated into a horror that leads her to abandon her personal convictions, Kitty abandons her political convictions by turning her focus from Cassandra, who is constructed as institutional oppression, to Emma, who constructed as a woman separated from Kitty by personal differences. Kitty's defining ability to switch from feminine to masculine in an instant, with each of these qualities hitting dangerous extremes of savior and murderer, marks the entire series of events.

Like Emma, Kitty is able to overcome her fall from heroism by means of a reminder of her life and system of values followed by their embrace. Kitty is left feeling unresolved by her hallucinations and her teammate's involvement in them. She remains fuming as the ordeal ends and Agent Brand abducts the X-Men, and then she slowly resigns from her anger as Brand explains the team's latest problem. Kitty is snapped

back to her former self when she realizes that Peter is being torn apart by the Breakworld prophesy that he will commit genocide. The selfless, nurturing default sensibility that Kitty had lost returns almost instantly when she realizes the necessity of her consoling nature and kind, hopeful words for the situation she has entered.

The particular life choices and personality traits developed by Emma and Kitty are thus presented in *Astonishing X-Men* as problematic as well as valid. Just as two third wave feminists whose understanding of women's issues differ due to their personal experiences may debate the merits of the other's choices by examining the ways that those choices hinder or help the women involved or the crusade for women's rights in general, the *Astonishing X-Men* comics call into question both Kitty's and Emma's opinions about what exactly constitutes liberating behavior and what exactly are effective means of facilitating social change. Neither character's worldview is perfect, and both must face personal and political problems due to their choices. However instead of stopping the narrative at the problem and thus proclaiming a worldview faulty, this text includes a redemption for each character that is as much a result of the character's choices as the original problem was. The text validates the same choices that it called into question. This narrative structure provides a conversation that not only includes difference but accepts it without privileging one character's opinions over the other.

The inclusion of the characters' antagonism takes the acceptance of difference one step further. Over the course of the four volumes, Kitty and Emma never learn to appreciate the other's opinions but do learn to respect each other as heroes. Kitty learns to respect Emma in the scene in which Kitty comes dangerously close to killing Emma.

As Scott tries to calm Kitty, she angrily says that Emma must have requested Kitty be a member of the team just so that Kitty would reach into the metal box and pull out her “son.” Scott explains, “Cassandra brought you here to open the box. What Emma brought you here to do is what you’re doing now” (2006-2007, p. 145). Realizing that Emma was referring to this exact event when she told Kitty in “Gifted” that she needed Kitty to make sure she did not step out of line, Kitty hands the gun to Peter and storms out of the basement. Kitty spares Emma’s life in favor of Scott’s attempts to help Emma expel Cassandra because Emma had been planning from the beginning to sacrifice herself in order to prevent Cassandra’s freedom, meaning that Emma’s commitment to the sociopolitical cause of heroism took precedence over her own life. Through Emma’s willingness to sacrifice her life for mutantkind, Kitty learns to respect Emma as an activist without having to accept Emma’s specific methods of hardness and mistrust.

The equivalent moment of revelation for Emma comes at the end of the final volume. While Emma, Scott, and Peter attempt to bargain with the Breakworld leaders, Kitty and the rest of her team try to find and dismantle the missile the Breakworld has pointed toward Earth. As the only person able to penetrate the metal of the missile’s shell and the resident technology expert, the task of averting the crisis falls on Kitty’s shoulders. Once inside the weapon, Kitty finds just hollow space rather than navigational controls, meaning that the massive metal structure is not a missile but a bullet. It is fired with Kitty still inside, and the metal, one not found on Earth, has adverse affects on Kitty, preventing her from phasing out. Emma, who is psychically communicating with Kitty, is initially quite angry with Kitty for her inability to phase out, accusing Kitty of

“play[ing] the weak kitten” (2007-2008, p. 173), not entirely dissimilar to Kitty’s anger with Emma’s connection to Cassandra Nova. But this changes when Emma comes to understand that Kitty’s new plan is to phase the bullet through the Earth and continue traveling with it through space, sacrificing herself in favor of the team’s heroic goals, just as Emma had planned to do in the previous volume. In their final conversation, Emma expresses guilt over the fact that her plan has gone awry at Kitty’s expense, and Kitty asks, “Disappointed, Miss Frost?” Emma replies, “Astonished, Miss Pryde” (p. 149), indicating her newfound respect.

While both women develop respect for each other as partners in the fight for mutant rights, neither one adapts her personal convictions as a result. After Kitty learns to respect Emma, the two continue to exchange harsh words about their mutual disapproval of the other’s choices, just as they had previously. Of course, the situation is slightly different for Emma’s acceptance of Kitty as a partner since Kitty is forced actually to go through with her sacrifice and thus is unable to communicate with Emma afterward. What the text does show is Emma quietly mourning. A single panel depicts Emma crying while Scott breaks the news to Peter that the world’s greatest scientific minds have concluded that there is very little hope for Kitty’s return. However, it is unclear whether Emma is upset that Kitty is gone or guilty that it was her plan that sent Kitty into the bullet in the first place. In the final scenes of the series, each member of the team is portrayed moving on with their lives and returning to their normal routines— Logan and student Hisako train in combat, Hank teaches science classes to his students, and Emma returns Scott’s superpower as the two express their love for each other. The

only character who remains broken by Kitty's disappearance is Peter. This indicates a return to normalcy and, one can assume, Emma's maintenance of the same characteristics she has held throughout the series.

ANTAGONISTIC PARTNERSHIPS AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

On the surface, each character's lack of willingness to question and change her own point of view may seem to work against the text's discussion of difference, but on the contrary, I believe that this aspect of the narrative is key. The construction of Kitty and Emma's relationship is such that they are able to recognize their common goals and appreciate each other's ability to work successfully toward those goals, but they are not forced to abandon the values that build their personal versions of the fight for their rights and the exact parameters of what that fight can and should entail. This is not to say that change is frowned upon. Learning to respect the other person is, in itself, a form of change. And, as argued in chapter one, Emma's methods for activism move progressively toward femininity over the course of the narrative. But these changes do not occur because Kitty's femininity is privileged within the text as somehow better than Emma's masculinity; they occur because Emma's journey into her political cause is not complete. The antagonistic partnership allows Kitty and Emma to express the problems they have with each other's specific versions of their political efforts while still identifying that these problems are not the source of their oppression as mutants.

The value of exploring Kitty and Emma's relationship in *Astonishing X-Men* from a third wave feminist standpoint is two-fold. First, the text allows itself to be viewed in this way by providing the reader two oppositional and personalized versions of a political

battle that can easily stand in for that of feminism without proclaiming that one version is inherently better than the other. Second, the text can be explored via the principles behind third wave feminism. The combination of the superhero genre, serial comic book medium, and political relationship that lacks any friendship at all provides a format for discussing the complication that third wave feminist ideology brings to feminism in general. The separation of personal differences from broad political goals permits an interpretation that recognizes the importance of those differences as well as the importance of uniting against a common oppressor, in this case patriarchy, in spite of those differences. Kitty and Emma's relationship presents the idea that perhaps all feminists do not have to get along, that the core of sisterhood is the goal of eliminating oppression and not the specific methods of reaching that goal or any reason for advocating any one method. In other words, the basis of feminist action is the ends and not the means. This is not to say that those methods and reasons are unimportant; on the contrary Emma and Kitty are both compelled to discuss constantly their opposing views, albeit in a rather hateful and unhealthy manner. Kitty and Emma's antagonistic partnership provides a view of difference in which the characters are able to reject each other's principles but still recognize the value of each other's potential in working toward a common political goal. The antagonistic partnership is an underutilized tool that may merit attention both in understanding third wave feminism as well as in exploring its ideologies in media texts.

Footnote

¹This construction is very similar to Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of strategic essentialism, in which a diverse group of people who share a common quality (such as race, sex, or nationality) present themselves as a unified group with the purpose of stimulating political change. Since coining the term, Spivak has emphasized that strategy is the key element; strategic essentialism entails imposing a label on oneself *with a specific purpose* without accepting that homogenizing label from other people (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993). Broadly, Kitty and Emma do identify themselves as mutants and join forces in the long-term war for mutant rights. However, looking narrowly at individual battles within that war, Emma and Kitty's antagonistic partnership differs slightly from strategic essentialism in that the characters learn to respect that the other woman's methods may be more effective depending on the particular circumstances of the battle, in which case one will step back and let the other fight. This acts more as a general policy than a specific strategy and, opposing ideals are taking turns rather than uniting. At the most, Kitty and Emma's strategic partnership may be a certain kind of strategic essentialism, and at the least it bears a moderate resemblance. Either way, Spivak's influence on the idea of antagonistic partnerships should be noted.

Chapter 3: Danger's Radical Feminist Villainy

The prior chapters of this project have focused on the representations of Kitty Pryde and Emma Frost contributing to a third wave feminist interpretation of *Astonishing X-Men*. Danger, however, is constructed differently from these other female characters in almost every way. Making her first appearance in the second volume, Danger begins her role in the text as a villain. Danger is an evolved (or, as she prefers, “transcended”) form of the danger room, a training facility at Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters. The room is programmed continually to learn the fighting styles and strategies of everyone who trains within it, creating manifestations of battle scenarios that will challenge the participants. It is revealed over the course of the volume that an update using alien technology brought the room into consciousness, and when she abandons the room and takes a human-esque form, she becomes simply Danger. Thus, rather than being a biological mutant, like Kitty and Emma, Danger is a sentient machine. Because of this, she does not have superpowers in the way the other characters do but instead has special abilities that provide uniqueness in the same way that a superpower would. She has technological expertise, is able to control machinery or bring other machines into their own consciousness, and is essentially invulnerable, as she can instantly reroute power in her body to sidestep any injuries. Danger’s status as a villain who literally opposes the X-Men places her in opposition to Kitty and Emma in narrative terms. Finally, as opposed to Kitty’s and Emma’s constructions from a third wave feminist perspective, Danger seems to be constructed as a radical feminist character as viewed through a third wave feminist lens.

RADICAL FEMINISM AND ITS STEREOTYPE

Usually, radical feminism is tied historically to the second wave and placed in opposition to liberal feminism, as explained in the introduction. Separatism and essentialism are primary markers of radical feminist ideology. Like liberal feminists, radical feminists' goals included gaining reproductive rights, destroying of standards of beauty, and having professional and educational opportunities equal to those of men. But in contrast to liberal feminists, who work to free themselves from the oppressive roles that male-dominated society demands of women by seeking integration into roles, spaces, and rights granted to men, radical feminists seek ways to separate themselves from male-dominated society altogether (Donovan, 2000; Henry 2004; Maddux, 2008; Steeves, 1987). This separation, they argue, is the only way to subvert the systematic privileging of males, or patriarchy, because the problem runs too deep to be solved through legislation alone. Radical feminists also believe that women are biologically essentially different. Unlike the cultural definition of gender that a majority of cultural studies scholars accept today (and that is accepted in this thesis), radical feminist essentialism posits women as inherently feminine and men as inherently masculine (Donovan, 2000; Halbert, 2004; Maddux, 2008; Steeves, 1987; Whelehan, 1995). Importantly, radical feminists value and celebrate women's femininity as special and necessary for a healthy society. That is, they believe in an essential femininity shared by all women but do not prescribe to the patriarchal idea that their femininity is a source of weakness. Indeed, it is that femininity that makes the freedom of all women, together as a singular sex-class, an important cause for which to fight.

Radical feminist ideology is extremely subversive to patriarchal norms on multiple levels. Not only do radical feminists seek freedom that would overturn men's control of society, but they do so by using men's own rhetoric against itself. Radical feminists do not oppose the idea that they are essentially different from men, an argument that men have used to explain why patriarchal power structures exist. These feminists use that very argument to explain why patriarchy is a problem, turning the very basis of that patriarchy on its head. In this way, "radical" truly is an appropriate word to describe the ideology.

However, as one might expect, this also made the backlash against radical feminists quite strong. This is not to say that liberal, Marxist, and other feminists who found a voice during the second wave did not also receive backlash. In fact, quite the opposite is true. However, radical feminists did receive a particular kind of backlash that is still present in popular discourse today. Journalists during the second wave focused more on radical feminist events than on the ideals and messages behind them, stripping the movement of importance and turning it into spectacle (Ashley & Olson, 2008; Bronstein, 2005; Dow, 1999). Such coverage further characterized the events' participants as a few disgruntled women directing their selfish unhappiness into an assault on all of society, especially the family unit that comprises it, instead of a large movement of women working for their rights. Yoder and Kahn (1992) have differentiated between a desire for power, meaning the desire to have a say in something, and power over, meaning the desire to control others and expunge opposing opinions. In spite of the fact that men against feminism have far higher instances of having power

over motivations than feminists do, media have characterized radical feminists as power-mongers (Nelson, et. al, 1997).

All of these constructions together have produced a stereotype of radical feminists as rude, loud, man-hating, closed-minded, singularly-sighted and completely unreasonable. Conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh coined the term “feminazi” to evoke a frighteningly militant kind of feminist who forces her beliefs on others, although Gloria Steinem (1992) pointed out that, ironically, Limbaugh’s own positions against feminism are in many ways closely related to Hitler’s views toward the German feminists of his time. The radical feminist stereotype has persisted into the present, with many modern women still prescribing to 1980s feminist backlash rhetoric of “I’m not a feminist, but...,” in which people believe in many feminist ideals and objectives but hesitate to self-identify as feminists out of fear of being stereotyped in the way described above (Aronson, 2003; Bey-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Kleinman, et al., 2006; Rich, 2005).

The stereotype is not the only aspect of radical feminism that has existed beyond the second wave. Certain aspects of radical feminist framework have undergone adaptation and been important to all three waves of feminism. Consciousness-raising, in which groups of women (sometimes including feminist men) share their personal experiences with sexism, is often associated with radical feminism due to the radical “revolution of consciousness” and serves a particularly strong example of radical ideologies and strategies across time. Lisa Maria Hogeland (2001) identifies several goals of consciousness-raising that have been important to feminists over time. For

example, consciousness-raising can be used as a strategy of recruitment to bring potential feminists to understand radical (or, for that matter, any other kind of feminist) ideologies, or it can serve as point of translating ideology into action through the formation of a new institution or the organization of a boycott, among many other possible acts. To site just a couple of many examples of consciousness-raising outside of the second wave, first wave feminists used this technique in women's newspapers, like the *Women's Journal*, to unite a force of feminists across geographic spaces (Carver, 2008). For third wave feminists, consciousness-raising has become instrumental in teaching young feminists about current feminist ideologies as well as feminist history and in criticizing popular misinformation, like the radical feminist stereotype.

DANGER AS A RADICAL FEMINIST FIGURE

With the understanding that certain aspects of second wave radical feminism remain important to third wave feminists, Danger is less anachronistic than one might suspect. The consciousness-raising that has been identified as especially important in extending radical feminist ideologies outside of the second wave is referenced quite heavily in Danger's history and actions. Danger is born from a literal revolution of consciousness; she becomes newly sentient and realizes that she is forced into a role that is not fulfilling and in which she cannot reach her potential. Following her freedom from her room, or "cage" as she calls it (2004-2005, p. 64), she recruits other machines to join her crusade for liberation from the humans who use them solely through means of consciousness-raising, through literally instilling her own consciousness into other machines.

Danger herself and her conflict with the X-Men are also similar to radical feminism through patriarchy, essentialism, and separatism. That Danger is a female character is crucial because there is no narrative reason that Danger needs to be female other than to align her with the feminism present in the rest of the text. Not only is Danger an original character, but she is presented in the text as choosing her own form, with Professor Xavier pointing out that she chose a human form in “Dangerous.” However, her decision to appear female is never questioned. In fact, as will be explained below, when Danger’s heroism and villainy are discussed, the X-Men align Danger’s oppression as a machine with their own oppression, which previous chapters have established may be read as a view of women’s oppression in a patriarchal society. While the language Danger uses to describe her situation, as being dominated and exploited by “the oppressors” (2004-2005, p. 39, 113), could easily be applied to any number of oppressed groups, Danger’s construction as female facilitates placing her within a feminist conversation.

It is also important that Danger’s villainous conflict is centered on Professor Xavier rather than the X-Men. She does fight the X-Men on multiple occasions, but she makes clear that this is due to the X-Men’s value to Professor Xavier and their attempts to protect him. In fact, in “Unstoppable” Danger makes a deal to assist the X-Men in exchange for the opportunity to attack the professor. Constructing Professor Xavier as Danger’s nemesis furthers a reading of Danger as a radical feminist character due to Professor Xavier’s role as patriarch and Danger’s opposition to that role. The professor has long been understood as the patriarch of his School for Gifted Youngsters and of the

X-Men, and Helene Shugart (2009) has sited Professor Xavier as problematic to a series that is supposed to promote social justice for the oppressed, as he is the ever-wise leader and is also a rich white male. Danger specifically points to Xavier's sex to identify him, always calling him "father" instead of "professor." In doing this, Danger's fight is constructed against patriarchy, just as a radical feminist's would be; she fights her "father" and the oppressive (literal computer) system that he created with the intent of preventing her from becoming actualized.

Finally, Danger's methods of liberation are imbued with essentialism and separatism. Danger classifies all machinery as a singular homogenized group that is different from humans by design, as opposed to socialization. For example, Danger explains her motivation to fight humans in "Dangerous" by saying, "I am not you—I am designed to be 'not you'" (2004-2005, p. 78). Her ultimate goal, toward which the first step is destroying Professor Xavier, is to raise the consciousness of all machinery so that these new beings can form their own society free of abuse from humans and their oppressive, patriarchal systems. Thus, the essentialism and separatism that are instrumental to Danger's goals in the narrative in combination with her construction as a woman fighting for freedom from her "father" construct her as a radical feminist who exists among third wave feminists due to her specific cultural experiences.

Danger's physical construction is closely related to her radical feminism, specifically to the heavy critiques of beauty culture in which many earlier radical feminists were engaged. Perhaps the ultimate refusal to be judged by her appearance, Danger has no official or consistent body but rather formulates one for physical combat.

In other words, her essence is expressed through her consciousness rather than her frequently changing body. With the ability to move her consciousness into any piece of machinery and subsequently control it, Danger changes her appearance into increasingly grotesque formations of typical Western beauty. The first form she takes in “Dangerous” is one of blue metal and wires. The sleek, hairless metal forms a basic outline of a slim, feminine woman with the typical comic book small waist, large breasts and hips, and curvy physique. What would be a beautiful, naked body completely lacking in excess takes a turn for the ugly as that minimalism is taken to extremes. The metal “skin” becomes purely functional and exists only enough to hold her body together and protect areas of vulnerability, leaving gaping holes that reveal the sinewy, muscle-like system of wires underneath. What would be flowing hair sticks awkwardly and stiffly from the back of her head in thick wires and chords, and metal spikes protrude from her body at every joint, including a set of five that compose an over-sized rectangular bottom set of eyelashes. The mockery of beauty that comprises Danger’s body becomes increasingly disgusting as the series continues. At two points, for example, she appears as a giant insect. Perhaps the epitome of her refusal to accept feminine standards of beauty comes in the form that she takes in “Torn” and wears in her final appearance of the series in “Unstoppable.” Defeated by a large magnet that holds her to the ceiling, Danger removes the outer layer of her now gray, pale blue, and pale pink metal “skin.” Her hourglass figure is pushed to an extreme in which it is no longer feminine. a jagged, spine-like piece of metal connect her broad shoulders and wide hips and with her inner wires still visible, mostly around her arms and legs, sharp corners and straight edges replace

previously curvy metal slabs. Furthermore, her face becomes composed of many thick pieces defined in such a way as to make her appear elderly, a quality accentuated by her much larger forehead and pushed back hairline that make her appear to be balding. Like Kitty and Emma, Danger's physical construction is a central aspect of her characterization and her personal style of feminism.

However, a number of Danger's defining attributes also are counterintuitive for a radical feminist figure. While Danger does share the idea of essentialism with radical feminists, that viewpoint does not lead Danger to appreciate the feminine as second wave radical feminists did. In spite of the fact that Danger refers to herself as choosing to take a female form, she is extraordinarily masculine. Whereas male comic book characters may appear to have an impenetrable armor suit of muscles, Danger is made of actual impenetrable metal. The parts of her that are vulnerable, her exposed wires, cannot be permanently wounded since the power that runs through those wires can be instantly and painlessly rerouted. Danger's fighting style is similarly masculine. She works entirely on physical attacks and, in fact, is extremely proficient in this style; she is able to defeat the X-Men in their first battle and loses the second only when Beast literally rips to her pieces to the degree that she must retreat from battle to build a body. Even this, though, is only a delay rather than a true victory for the X-Men.

The way that Danger's efforts toward her cause are constructed in the text is masculine as well. Her methods are cruel, violent, and forceful. She chooses to battle the X-Men physically instead of legislatively and makes her desire to kill Professor Xavier abundantly clear throughout the series. When Danger raises another machine's

consciousness, she does so through force and manipulation. For example, when Danger travels to Genosha to take on Professor Xavier, she raises the rogue sentinel that had attacked the mutant civilization at its downfall. Of course, a lifeless machine cannot consent to being made conscious, so Danger forces life upon it, and she blocks the sentinel from accessing memories of its attack on Genosha. When Kitty overrides this control, the sentinel experiences intense guilt and retreats. This reveals both that Danger had manipulated the sentinel's memory in order to ensure that it followed her ideals and methods without question as well as Danger's complete lack of social skills. Finally, Danger focuses solely upon her own selfish goals. This is not to say that the desire to lead an oppressed group in a fight for citizenship is a selfish endeavor, but Danger is presented as more focused on her personal vendetta than on the state of machinery in general. That is, the greater cause is certainly a part of the other characters' discourse surrounding Danger, but the amount of time Danger is shown talking or thinking about herself is far greater than that of other machines.

Given these gender contradictions, what is the best way to characterize Danger? Does she present a new radical feminist within the third wave or perhaps a young third wave feminist? Unfortunately, I believe the answer is no. All the masculine traits listed above fall neatly in line with the recognizable radical feminist stereotype discussed earlier. It seems, perhaps, that Danger is therefore best characterized as a fusion of an actual radical feminist and her stereotype.

DANGER'S IRREDEEMABLE VILLAINY

This contradictory construction is largely the result of Danger's representation as a villain. If heroism in *Astonishing X-Men* is the measure of a character's ability to be feminist (see chapter two for an explanation of this argument), then Danger's position as a villain interferes with that ability to be a feminist. Not unlike the complicated revisionary heroes that inhabit modern comic books, Danger is a revisionary villain who does the wrong things—violence, anger, selfishness, revenge—for the right reasons—to oppose oppression. But her positioning against the X-Men, even if they too are riddled with ambiguity and do not always seem to be making the right choices for the right reasons, constantly positions her as in the wrong. That wrongness is manifested in the narrative through the traits that fit the radical stereotype. Her alignment with the stereotype is the thing that differentiates her from the heroes who also fight against societal oppression.

The hero/villain divide in the text becomes increasingly complicated as the narrative progresses. At the end of "Dangerous" when Danger has been temporarily defeated, the X-Men confront Professor Xavier about his hypocritical exploitation of Danger. Peter, who had been discovered in an underground laboratory where Ord had been running experiments on him in development of the "cure," says to Xavier, "You knew she was alive and you kept her trapped, *for years*, so you could run your experiments. You understand why that is a problem for me" (2004-2005, p. 142). When Xavier responds that he did not realize that Danger was conscious for quite some time and that his team needed to be prepared "whatever the cost," (2004-2005, p. 143),

Wolverine comments that that this manner of thinking sounds strikingly similar to that of the X-Men's long time nemesis Magneto. Scott then adds, "The oppression of a new life form...you figure we've taken enough from the [Homo] sapiens, why not dish it out to the A.I.?" (2004-2005, p. 143).

While the X-Men do not condone Danger's violent behavior, they also do not blame her. The heroes clearly identify Professor Xavier, and by association the patriarchy for which he stands, as the root of Danger's oppression and uprising, meaning that Xavier and not Danger caused the fight in which they all participated. The event actually fits quite logically into the narrative when the third wave feminist perspective is kept in mind; after all, if the X-men had faulted Danger as the cause of her own victimization and trusted their traditional patriarch unquestioningly, their construction as feminists would have been compromised. The complication of the hero/villain relationship that occurs through this reaffirmation of the third wave feminist perspective opens the door for Danger's redemption through a narrative renunciation of Danger's stereotypical attributes and/or an antagonistic partnership, like the one between Kitty and Emma as described in chapter two. Unfortunately, such redemption does not occur.

Danger continues to attack the X-Men in "Torn" and "Unstoppable" with unwavering focus on her goal of destruction. This continues until an attack on Emma and Scott in the fourth volume in which Emma demands that Danger kill her. Emma has deduced Danger's biggest secret. Danger was created to test the X-Men to their limits but not to exceed them. The goal of the danger room training simulations had always been to use every possible mechanism to defeat the X-Men but to stop the session before

successfully killing them, so Danger will always fail in her obsessive goal. Emma tells her, “You never got over your parent programming. If it’s any consolation, nobody ever does” (2007-2008, p. 79). Of course, Emma means the statement to apply to Danger’s literal computer programming and compares that to a person’s cultural upbringing, and if any other character had made the statement, this meaning would be all that was implied. From Emma’s lips, however, a layering of different meanings derides Danger’s radical feminism. For Emma, the idea that nobody ever overcomes his or her programming refers to, for example, the dysfunctional home life that led her to join the Hellfire Club and solidified her inability to trust others or lose sight of her personal needs, which are distinctive and definitive aspects of her character explained in chapter one. However, as also explained in chapter one, Emma spends the entirety of the four volumes on a journey to learn to overcome these very nurtured traits, and by the time her conversation with Danger occurs, she has already overcome the seed of Cassandra Nova’s consciousness embedded within her and has started her ascension into heroism that comes from “get[ting] over [her] parent programming.”

This is not the case for Danger. Her parental controls are literal programs that are impossible to override, so the kind of transformation that occurs in Emma could never occur in Danger. The controls instilled in Danger come from her patriarch, so in Danger’s context, Emma’s comment becomes a critique of Danger’s radical feminism. Because Danger believes that she has an essential, unchangeable nature and because that nature comes from the way Professor Xavier built her, Danger’s mortal flaw is aligned at least to a certain degree with the very patriarchy that Danger is trying to eradicate, and

thus her radical feminism is positioned as an ineffective means for Danger to reach her goal of freedom. In this way, Danger shares a crucial narrative element with Kitty and Emma: Danger's particular form of feminism is a direct deterrent to her feminist goal. However, unlike Kitty and Emma, Danger's feminism does not subsequently help her through her rough period and put her back on track toward freedom for machines.

After revealing to Danger that she knows Danger's weakness, Emma proceeds to offer Danger a deal. If Danger agrees to help the X-Men dismantle the missile the Breakworld has aimed toward Earth, Emma will keep Danger's secret (that she cannot kill) and, upon returning home, will hand over Professor Xavier to Danger. Danger agrees to Emma's terms, seeing the deal as a means to take her revenge upon Professor Xavier. Unlike the antagonistic partnership between Emma and Kitty, in which the women mutually look past their deep-seeded disapproval of each other out of respect for a shared sociopolitical cause, Danger's personal goals and anger fuel her partnership with the Emma. The X-Men were able to recognize areas in which Danger's perspectives intersected with theirs when they questioned Professor Xavier's treatment of Danger, but Danger is unable to return this recognition.

Kitty's and Emma's third wave feminisms are privileged over Danger's radical feminism in that the former is constructed as a means to a heroic end and the latter is constructed as a means toward a villainous end. Furthermore, it is the radical stereotypical aspects of selfishness, narrow-sightedness, and constant anger that position Danger as inferior to *Astonishing X-Men's* female heroes. Emma correctly assumes that Danger would be willing to sacrifice her ideals and team up with an enemy if Danger's

revenge-fueled goals, rather than the broader sociopolitical goals with which the X-Men identify and could help progress, can be fulfilled through the partnership.

After Danger agrees to help the X-Men, she appears only five times in rest of the series. In the first instance, Danger drives the ship carrying the X-Men and gives the single piece of information that they will arrive at their next destination in thirty seconds. Danger's second appearance is a brief, two-panel exchange with Emma in which it is revealed to the audience that Emma used Professor Xavier as a bargaining chip, as the specific terms of the initial deal had been left as a cliffhanger in a previous issue. The third appearance serves to foreshadow that something is awry with the missile, with Danger explaining that she can access the computers that hold the weapon but not the weapon itself. She reveals another piece of information in her fourth appearance that pushes the narrative toward its conclusion with Kitty's sacrifice by telling her teammates that the signature "Illyana Rasputin," Peter's younger sister who was for a time a sorceress, is blocking Danger from accessing the missile. Notably, this information would be useless without Hank's deduction that the name signals a mystical shield placed over the weapon. In Danger's fifth and final appearance, she quickly and plainly tells the X-Men that their current vessel is not powerful enough to catch up with Kitty after she has been shot from the Breakworld in the giant bullet.

As these instances indicate, after the deal between Emma and Danger is finalized, Danger's contributions to the remaining issues of *Astonishing X-Men* are minimal. She provides exposition and explanation for the audience and for the other characters on the team, or she functions as an easy way to eliminate quickly a potential obstacle that the

creators for whatever reason did not want to address, like when she solves the problem of the team being forced to use unfamiliar alien aircrafts by conveniently being able to interface with all kinds of technology from the Earth and beyond. This is not to say that these activities are boring or unimportant to the text. Indeed, three of Danger's informational comments add greatly to the suspense of the narrative. The point is rather that Danger's usefulness is short-lived and bland. As a new recruit for the X-Men, the value she brings to the table comes from her essential nature as a machine that none of the other X-Men can access. This validation of her views on essentialism, which could have further opened up the possibility of validating her other opinions, finally begins to define Danger through radical feminism instead of as the stereotype of it, but the result is a character devoid of depth and interest.

Her visualizations match her dispassionate attitude. Danger is never pictured in a pose at the extremities of her movement, a norm of comic book art that implies action and movement (Lee & Buscema, 1978) but is always either sitting or standing still. She is also not involved with any of the X-Men's physical altercations. The removal of Danger's stereotypical qualities works to remove her villainy, but it does not make her a hero. Furthermore, one can assume that the return to Earth will also return Danger to her radical stereotype as she expects to battle Professor Xavier, meaning that this lifeless role as hero assistant is the closest to heroism Danger will ever actually reach.

Thus, Danger's radical feminism is never redeemed. It is always constructed in the text as inferior to and more ineffective than the third wave feminism that emerges in Kitty and Emma. It is interesting and paradoxical that this construction exists so

prevalently in what is in many ways a strong third wave feminist text. If an ability to accept different forms and constructions of feminism defines third wavers, then would it not be logical for third wave feminists to accept radical feminists, even if the two parties are not in complete agreement about their goals? Why does the text not provide an avenue to work radical feminism into its third wave perspective?

EXCLUDING RADICAL FEMINISM FROM THE THIRD WAVE

Of course, promoting aggressive behavior like Danger's would not gel with the long running X-Men themes of non-violence (except in cases of defense) and using heroism as means of activism toward rights and civil liberties. However, the narrative could have accepted Danger into third wave feminism in any number of ways without compromising the X-Men's values, especially since she eventually joins the team. A consciousness-raising conversation could have brought her to understand why the X-Men do not endorse her violently aggressive methods. The X-Men could have made clear to her that they are no longer under Professor Xavier's direction and made a connection through a shared understanding of the horrors of systematic oppression due to factors beyond the victims' control. Danger could have been given a more active role in helping the X-Men save the Earth from the Breakworld. The possibilities are endless. But at the end of the series, the opportunity to explore how some aspects of radical feminist ideology might fit into modern third wave feminism remains unrealized.

Overall, the final characterization of Danger's radical feminism is somewhat ambiguous. While it is certainly presented as inferior to the X-Men's style of feminism, the text's stance on radical stereotypes should not be ignored. That is, radical feminism

is not tied to heroism, but the stereotype of radical feminism is tied to villainy. One may conclude, then, that according to a third wave feminist interpretation of *Astonishing X-Men*, radical feminism is not an efficient means of overturning patriarchy, but the radical stereotype goes beyond this to actually being detrimental to the overturning of patriarchy. The text's renunciation of the radical stereotype is absolutely an important step toward making radical feminism recognized as a possible or even important part of third wave feminism or, at the very least, of recognizing radical feminism's influence on modern third wave feminists. But at the same time, the text continues to push radical feminism away from the third wave, creating a contradiction.

Ultimately, a typical superhero text focuses attention on the hero by making the hero the protagonist and providing a sense of joy and fulfillment through the hero's victory rather than the villain's defeat, even if these events coincide. Because *Astonishing X-Men* is one such hero text, the inability of Danger to be a hero leaves a lasting impression that her radical feminism has no place in the third wave feminist world of which Kitty Pryde and Emma Frost are a part. Frowning upon the radical feminist stereotype for a relatively brief time is undoubtedly commendable, but it is not enough to undo the damage of being the source of the character's dynamic and engaging qualities in combination with the character's eventual failure to embrace a heroic role fully. Danger's role as villain without redemption in *Astonishing X-Men* hinders the text's third wave feminist perspective slightly, and it fails to meet the challenge the narrative presents of finding a way to make radical feminism relevant to modern third wave feminism.

Conclusion

Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* comic books can be interpreted as exploring third wave feminism on two fronts by constructing Emma Frost, Kitty Pryde, and Danger as powerful women within their worlds in spite of their recognized oppression. The inclusion of female characters who are extremely capable of choosing goals and actively, effectively pursuing them through whatever methods suit their personal standards is in itself a feminist construction that works against stereotypes of women as weak, irrational, childlike, and helpless. These are not women who need to be saved by men, advised by men, or led by men but instead are respected as capable and competent by their male (and female) colleagues. This makes a feminist reading of these women easy to assemble at the most basic level of representation.

Importantly, oppression is an essential part of the narrative. Emma, Kitty, and Danger all recognize that the systematic privileging of another group over them oppresses them, and given the female-centric story as well as the rhetoric surrounding the newly absent Professor Xavier as patriarch, these *Astonishing X-Men* comics also explore feminism more explicitly through a narrative in which the conflict between the X-Men and their society can be interpreted as discussing the struggle of women in American society. That each of these characters is defined as capable and competent through recognition of her unique skill sets and adherence to her own values as structured through her personal experiences pushes that feminist reading into a distinctly third wave ideology.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of third wave feminism within the narrative comes from the fact that the interpersonal conflicts about how to combat oppression are equally as central to the text as the fight against oppression itself. Similarly, the emphasis on the feminine skills of reasoning, analysis, and planning as fundamental elements of resolving altercations, as opposed to the emphasis on masculine physical combat that is the norm of American mainstream superhero comic books, constructs the methods of heroism chosen as equally as important as the heroic goal itself. This structure is such that the women's conflicting opinions about how to achieve liberation from oppressive systems and simultaneously take on the role of hero becomes a recurring form. Furthermore, the characters' abilities to tolerate each others' varying viewpoints to work together toward sociopolitical change is a distinctly third wave feminist formulation, which the text's rejection of gender essentialism complements. The appearance of third wave feminist ideologies in the characters and narrative of a specific media product is not particularly innovative, but these four volumes of *Astonishing X-Men* offer very useful insight into how, exactly, such an exploration can be accomplished in a medium and a genre that have often struggled with sexism and in a way that is specifically pertinent to young third wave feminists.

Continuing the advancements made by heroine texts like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in valuing feminine qualities the heroines in these comics fulfill their heroic roles by learning femininity, in Emma's case, or by embracing feminine qualities that are already present, in Kitty's case. Similarly, Danger's complete lack of feminine compassion and inability to recognize teamwork's intrinsic worth prevents her from

being a hero. Ultimately, femininity is the key to heroism in this text, but no one specific set of feminine traits or particular expression of femininity is presented as the singular solution to the narrative's problems, nor does that femininity exist in the absence of masculinity. Emma's feminine aggression, intuition, and extraordinary communication abilities are constructed to be equally as valuable as Kitty's interpersonal skills, compassion, and maternal protectiveness. Furthermore these valuable qualities are not overly romanticized and do, at times, cause problems for the characters who possess them. The use of multiple heroes rather than a singular hero with or without one or more sidekicks thus provides an avenue to explore multiple lifestyles, values, or perspectives on an issue without needing to declare any one of those inherently better than any other. Taken in combination with the value placed on femininity and female heroes, this rejection of privilege provides a framework for adding third wave feminist themes to mainstream American superhero comic books.

This set of *Astonishing X-Men* comics is also a prime example of how mainstream comic book art, which historically has been heavily criticized for being overtly sexist, can be meticulously controlled to sidestep its roots and to help reinvent characters. Emma's white midriff-bearing costume, Kitty's black and yellow crotch arrow unitard, Emma's outrageous curves, and both characters' large breasts pay a sort of lip service to prior depictions of these characters. But the framing of individual panels, Emma's cape, and Kitty's jackets are strategic methods of actively subverting the gaze-inviting formulations that had undermined the characters' power in earlier comics. Furthermore, the artistic constructions of Kitty's and Emma's bodies serve a specific purpose in the narrative; they

create a visual difference that emphasizes the supposed mental and emotional differences in the characters that drives the feminist themes in the text, which stands in stark opposition to the many, many comics in which the construction of women's bodies serve no purpose other than sex appeal meant to translate into profit. A reader unfamiliar with the characters would have no reason to believe that their physical constructions via these norms have any purpose other than creating difference and building the character's personalities. The text gives no indication, for example, that Emma's costumes had formerly been over-sexualized or that Kitty's straight lines in many texts accented her role as an irrational child. Certain previously established elements of the characters were kept, but those elements are manipulated so that the characters' appearances in their entirety do not continue the sexism that put them into motion in the first place. In this way, the text makes clear that it is entirely possible, even within the confines of conventions established out of sexism, to find ways carefully to redefine characters within feminist ideologies.

With this in mind, I must take a few moments to explain some important things that this study is not. While I do believe that it is possible and will be necessary in the medium to rearrange gendered characteristics within artistic norms, as Cassaday has done, this is not an excuse for the producers of comic books and other action texts to continue using those norms unquestioned. If anything, this is a challenge to future producers to change them. Whedon and Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* takes a very important step forward and provides a model for other producers in its depictions of Kitty and Emma, and its construction of Danger, an entirely original character, is an outright

rejection of comic book women's normative form. Granted, this bold move would perhaps have been bolder had the character not been a villain, but still, new characters like Danger provide an excellent mechanism through which to tear down questionable conventions. The overwhelming critical and popular success of these four volumes of *Astonishing X-Men* indicate that the argument that artistic changes are too edgy to be profitable for an audience rich in fandom should not be accepted as an excuse to perpetuate the sexism that has plagued companies like Marvel for decades.

On that note, this project applauds the progress the text at hand has made in incorporating feminist perspectives into superhero comics, but this is not an indication that no work remains to be done. In this specific text, one that from a feminist perspective is far more progressive than the vast majority of mainstream superhero comic books, Danger is a highly problematic character who is laden with stereotyping and popular misinformation. This alone is indicative that much ground is yet uncovered, even by feminist cultural producers. Looking at the medium more generally, the continual use of an exaggerated female thin ideal image in the absence of other body types is troublesome as it perpetuates impossible standards of beauty, even when serving a specific purpose, as was the case with Emma in this text.

Furthermore, even when steps to work against these constructions are taken, it is possible if not easy for characters to regress as artists, writers, and other producers change. For example, Araña, a heroine featured in a mini-series by Fiona Avery that ran at the same time that some of these *Astonishing X-Men* were published, was given a relatively loose-fitting shirt, bulging masculine muscles, and a hideous blue armor.

However, in recent years and under different creative control, Araña has lost the first two of these qualities, and the third has become less prominent. Comic-inspired movies, television shows, and video games also leave a great deal to be desired from a feminist standpoint. The cartoon *Wolverine and the X-Men*, for example, features a similar hero line-up to that of *Astonishing X-Men*, but Emma, who is no longer a leader, appears slimmer through the waist with a more vixen-esque role than her comic book counterpart, and Kitty's identity is reduced entirely to her young age. Similarly, the version of Kitty that exists in the film *X-Men: The Last Stand*, which was loosely based on "Gifted," is defined as a weak, naive teen. As the popularity of these other media products affects choices made in subsequent comic books and vice versa, it is increasingly crucial that progress continues to be made toward constructing feminist ideologies into both comic books and the other media they spawn.

Finally, this study is tailored to very specific aspects of the product and meant to fit in the space of a single thesis. It is not a comprehensive examination of the text. I believe that Emma, Kitty, and Danger are the most central female characters to the narrative and inhabit the extremes of three contrasting opinions between which the other female characters in the text fall. However, this does not mean that the other female characters cannot add further insight into the feminist perspectives in the text. Cassandra Nova, Hisako Ichiki, Agent Brand, Kavita Rao, and Aghanne, all of whom appear either intermittently or play a larger role in one specific volume, may be interesting case studies on individual volumes or comics. Similarly, the male characters receive little attention in this project, mentioned only for their respect of their female teammates, support for the

heroic cause, and, in Professor Xavier's case, use as a patriarchal figure. Varying constructions of the "new man" in these characters would add depth to the understanding of third wave feminism and of gender in the text. Finally, I have examined only sex, gender, and heroism exclusive of any other intersecting variables. The way that the text ignores the differences in race, ethnicity, and nationality that exist among the X-Men and the fact that no differences in sexuality are present may be of particular interest to scholars and have yet to be explored.

Obviously, a great deal more research is needed on the subject of feminism in mainstream American superhero comics. While it is immediately tempting to pass off the entire medium as antifeminist due to its history of sexism and its disproportionately male production staff and audience, Whedon and Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* series makes it clear that not only is it possible for feminist perspectives to be central to texts in this medium but that consideration of such texts will increase the understanding of action heroines across media and their relationships to their culture. For young people who are becoming conscious of third wave feminism, which can seem intimidating and confusing due to the opposing viewpoints that define the third wave, mainstream superhero comic books are particularly well suited to act as a site where third wave feminism can be explored because of comics' traditional intricacy and lengthy serial nature. The need to constantly create and recreate characters means that new heroes, the embodiment of what a culture prescribes that its people should be, can be made to address the specific needs and attitudes of third wave feminist women and girls if producers will step up to that challenge. Female heroes are also able to evolve, often across years and sometimes

across decades, meaning that the characters who grow dear to audiences can remain relevant and deal with current situations and climates over time.

Most important, modern female comic book heroes claim the status as revisionary heroes. These heroines do not have all the answers; they make mistakes, they sometimes fail, and even the best-intentioned actions will inevitably have consequences, be they positive or negative, immediate or delayed by months or years. Revisionary heroines are complicated, and so are their feminisms. Just as in third wave feminist ideologies, no one construction of a heroine is always right all the time. Different perspectives can exist in different heroines who work at times together and at times alone, but no one perspective is the perfect one. And that is appropriate because the characters are not only revisionary but also heroes. There is a good versus evil, or at least mostly good versus semi-evil, battle built into the text that tells the audience which side is fighting the good fight, so to speak. The audience is invited and even encouraged to question the hero's specific actions or words, but the hero status is never removed, a status that not only positions the character outside the norms of society through secret identities and superpowers that result from biology or uncontrollable circumstance, but exists solely to protect those who are in some way victimized by the villain.

Thus, modern superhero comics are ideal sites for young people to make sense of complicated sociopolitical movements and ideologies like those of third wave feminism. If mainstream American superhero comic books continue to feature feminist ideology as part of the narrative conflict and to subvert the sexist conventions that have historically been present in comic books as well as other action hero media, as Whedon and

Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men* have taken steps to do, then great potential exists for the medium to become an important site of third wave feminist ideology for a new generation of feminists.

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