



BOOK REVIEW:  
*Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in  
Transmedia Spaces*

*C. Palmer-Patel*

Carr, Bryan J. and Meta G. Carstarphen, editors. *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces*. Ohio State University Press, 2022. ISBN: 978-0-8142-5852-1.

*Gendered Defenders* is packed full of facts and contextual information about the publication histories, character arcs, and media battles of many of Marvel's famous female heroes. The volume's contributors point out the various ways that Head Editors and Executive Producers have sought to undermine the development of female characters over the years within both the movie franchises and comic book series, operating under the mistaken assumption that female leads are not profitable, despite evidence to the contrary. The authors of this collection gather this information, noting markers of success and contrasting them to the written and verbal testimonials of corporate bigwigs. It is a depressing, all-too-familiar history that unfortunately offers no surprises. While the impact of misogyny in the production of superhero franchises is not new information, the data and knowledge packed into *Gendered Defenders* is one of its biggest strengths. For instance, in Chapter 4, J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner take us through the development of the character of Carol Danvers – or Ms. Marvel, later Captain Marvel – the first female character to get her own feature film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The character appears in 1968 as a damsel in distress, followed first by a pivotal plot point centring around rape (and perhaps also incest), and subsequent retconning<sup>1</sup> of these events to sweep any uncomfortable or misogynist elements

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<sup>1</sup> Retconning occurs when later publications must acknowledge the original canonical material but seek to re-imagine the storyline in order to change these events. Devices such as memory erasure, alternate timelines, and false information are commonly used as plot devices to retcon

under the rug and dismiss them. By erasing Danvers' memory of the rape (along with some gaslighting), Marvel sidesteps the issue of having it define her or be a part of her character development, wiping the slate clean to deliver a more audience-friendly Danvers suitable for the big screen. Stevens and Turner fit this information against a backdrop of second-wave feminism, exploring how the development of Danvers fits with or is counter to feminist movements.

The editors, Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen, clearly outline the thesis of the book in their introduction, noting how "the evolution of Marvel's female characters mirrors the development, struggles, and triumphs of women in the real world" (7). For someone trained in literary criticism, this thesis is, I am sorry to say, underwhelming. All literature as a product of its culture is reflective of the real world. There is nothing challenging or controversial about this argument and nothing that would point to why Marvel productions should be considered unique. For instance, turning again to the rape of Carol Danvers, which sets the tone for the later essays since it is discussed in the first analytical chapter, Stevens and Turner offer this quick synopsis of the event: "Her 'son,' a being known as Marcus, explains that he abducted Danvers, used mind control to seduce her, impregnated her with his own essence, and then wiped her memory before returning her to Earth to give birth to him" (38). This summary is followed by a lengthy extract from a critic focusing on the response – or lack of response – to the incident, noting that rather than treating it as rape, many fans celebrated the storyline as Ms. Marvel finding a good man. With such a brief summary and with no accompanying literary analysis, I found it difficult to understand why fans might have reached this awkward conclusion: how does using mind-control to impregnate a woman equate to finding a good man?<sup>2</sup> And what about the semi-incestuous nature of the relationship? What are we to make of a being impregnating themselves into a woman?

To my surprise, rather than answering these questions, the authors shy away from even flagging them as areas of interest. And yet, after my initial disappointment with this lack of analysis, I found myself thrilled with the sheer amount of information collected in the book. As the contributors are trained in areas such as media, communications, and journalism, each page is filled with references to the original publications or to relevant criticism situated in an accessible history of Marvel comics. The strengths of this book are noticeable in establishing a greater narrative of publication and production history and placing them within the social-political context of the time. As a result, *Gendered Defenders* provides a handy reference guide to anyone who wants to become familiar with both the story arcs and publication histories of the most prominent of Marvel's female heroes, synthesizing information that is spread across multiple media (comic books, television, film, and video games). I have often felt that the MCU is too large and too confusing, and it is sometimes too much *effort* to absorb it through all of its facets, but *Gendered Defenders* does the work for you. The three-part introduction by the editors lays out a firm foundation for this history by first providing the aims of the book and its thesis.

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a story. Reconning might occur for any number of reasons, such as to deal with ideas that might no longer be socially acceptable, or in order to match parallel storylines and character arcs.

<sup>2</sup> My own hypothesis is that the semi-incestuous nature of impregnating Danvers with the essence of himself might be equated with the Christ myth. But this is an unsubstantiated interpretation as I have not read the comic book myself.

In addition to the co-authored first chapter, this introductory part consists of a synthesis of the history of women in the comic book industry (Chapter 2, authored by Carr) as well as a reflection on the complexity and nature of transmedia productions (Chapter 3, authored by Carstarphen). The following chapters then explore in turn the characters of Carol Danvers (as already noted), Agent Peggy Carter (by Kathleen M. Turner Ledgerwood), Jessica Jones (Amanda K. Kehrberg), Shuri (Rachel Grant), Kamala Khan (Maryanne A. Rhett), Misty Knight (Stephanie L. Sanders), Black Widow (Julie A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus), Pepper Potts (Mildred F. Perreault and Gregory P. Perreault), Squirrel Girl (Carrielynn D. Reinhard), and at the end circle back again to Carol Danvers (Annika Hagley).

It is worth noting that roughly two thirds of the book (not counting the introductions) focuses on white feminism. Specifically, the focus seems to be on American white feminism since the majority of the authors are based in the United States. Although to be fair, the Marvel franchise itself is primarily an American production, even if the MCU is a global phenomenon. When diversity is brought to the forefront, I found myself uncomfortable with the presentation. Part 3, which collects the chapters on Shuri, Kamala Khan, and Misty Knight, takes as its central theme “the innate duality of the heroine and the complexity of feminine identity and probe[s] how various identity characteristics affect both character and reader” (9). That said, all three chapters focus on racial identity rather than considering other intersections, and while postcolonial feminism is an important topic, as a person of color myself, I am a touch disappointed that color is highlighted as the central defining feature of these otherwise complicated characters. That is not to say that I find fault with the way that either the contributors or editors approached the material as racism and colonization are discussed sensitively. Yet, there is a missed opportunity for providing more nuanced presentations of these characters alongside flagging possible elements of tokenism. With a title such as *Gendered Defenders*, I was also surprised and disappointed to find its focus purely on the female body as discussions of LGBTQIA+ in relation to the Comics Code Authority<sup>3</sup> would have been a worthy addition to the collection.

However, my expectations for the collection are perhaps unreasonable, likely elevated due to my excitement that academic work on female superhero characters is finally gaining traction. It is an area of research – due to the ever-expanding transmedial world – that is never finished. I am thrilled to add *Gendered Defenders* to my own personal collection; as I said at the beginning of this review, with limited access to research facilities, I have spent countless hours trying to find the information provided in this book. Having a book that gathers this research together is definitely an asset for an independent researcher like myself, or for someone who is new to criticism in comics and needs a starting point, or simply for anyone who wants to know a little bit more backstory about some of their beloved MCU characters.

Biography: Charul “Chuckie” Palmer-Patel’s first monograph, *The Shape of Fantasy* (Routledge 2020), investigates the narrative structures of epic fantasy and was shortlisted twice for the Mythopoeic Non-Fiction Award. *Sideways in*

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<sup>3</sup> The Comics Code Authority policed how sex and violence was depicted in comic books; see Carr’s single-authored chapter for more detail.

*Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fictions* (Liverpool University Press, 2019), a collection co-edited with Glyn Morgan, was shortlisted for the British Science Fiction Association Non-Fiction Award. Palmer-Patel serves as a trustee for the Science Fiction Foundation charity group and is on the editorial board of Gold SF, a fiction imprint of Goldsmiths Press that publishes intersectional science fiction. Her next monograph, *Negotiating Motherhood and Maternity in American Fantasy Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press), will analyze texts published by a range of American identities.