
Wonder Woman's Makeover

PRINCESS DIANA OF THEMYSKIRA, Wonder Woman to you and me, has been the subject of at least four creation myths and has gained and lost numerous superpowers in the process. Emerging in 1941 from a lost race of Amazons her first task was the defeat of the evil empires of Japan, the Kingdom of Italy, and the Third Reich.

Not to be outdone by Superman, Wonder Woman could fly with super speed and agility, and as we all know, she succeeded in frustrating the evil designs of those evil empires with the use of her invisible aeroplane, her super stamina, her indestructible bracelets, and her rapport with animals. She was assisted in all this by her flaring patriotic skirt – which with a mass of white stars on a blue ground evoked *Old Glory* – and her big hair, knee-high shiny red boots, her golden bodice and red trim, which showed her otherwise naked shoulders and shapely legs to great effect.

Over the years the relationship of gold to red in her outfit has often reversed and her rather full skirt was quickly replaced by revealing tight knickers of the same patriotic design. Now, just last week, Wonder Woman acquired a 'New Look'. Her big sculpted hairdo has become fashionably spiky if not exactly unruly, her patriotic knickers have disappeared under a black leotard, and a blue satiny bolero-type jacket now masks her naked shoulders. She's still sexy, if you like that sort of thing, but she does not wear her love of country on her sleeve, or rather, on her knickers anymore. This is a confusing departure, and rather blunts her conservative feminist edge.

Princess Diana of Themyscira, like her proletarian sister, Rosie the Riveter, emerged in the fight against monsters, and to do all they could to defeat the warlike designs of evil men. As the song said:

All day long
Whether rain or shine
She's part of the assembly line.
She's making history,
Working for victory
Rosie the Riveter.

It's worth remembering these bizarre images of feminism in which women were exalted as fantasy fighters, or as all too-real industrial shift workers, when confronted by Sarah Palin. Sarah Palin has got to the top of the Republican pile as a wife and mother who can shoot a gun and face down the liberal elite, while baking cookies and cheering the kids on the hockey field. She's a strong woman, the equal of any man, who has apparently retained all her feminine charm; there will be no dungarees for Sarah. She is Wonder Woman with starry knickers. There is nothing dour or earnest about Sarah.

Some may think that she's a bloody moron, but it is her manifest ignorance, and her lack of intellectual sophistication, that enhances her feminine charm. It enables her to project herself as a 'no nonsense' friend of the people in general, and of hardworking women in particular. She evokes Annie Oakley as a real life wonder woman, a frontier woman who had "dirt under her finger nails", a woman who could ride hard, shoot, "and pull a plough". The fact that Annie Oakley, despite her hard start in life, was big in the entertainment business is quietly forgotten. This is of a piece with the fact that Calamity Jane (that other frontierswoman) established her notoriety by subjugating Native Americans in the Dakotas, rather than acting as a role model for Doris Day.

In fact, these tough self-defining women were not feminists. They were not feminists any more than Boudicca, Chief of the Iceni, or Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, were feminists. To be sure they were in most respects the equals of any man, they did what had to be done in extremely trying circumstances; they did not appeal to a sense of sisterhood (or victimhood) in

order to get what they wanted. Like Wonder Woman and Rosie the Riveter they fought tenaciously to determine their own fate within a world defined and dominated by men. Such women did not challenge patriarchal relations nor seek to establish the equality of women.

In these respects they were pretty much like role models for Sarah Palin's "emerging conservative feminist identity". Sarah's 'conservative feminism' is a big tent, which seeks to encompass "pro-life feminism", "tea party feminism", and something called "real feminism". These feminisms are being grouped together by Palin as a way of emphasising motherhood, opposition to abortion and gun control, while pointing up a prior commitment to femininity and traditional gender roles. By talking about the strength and ability of some women to compete in a man's world these 'conservative feminists' are seeking to rebrand feminism as the celebration of remarkable women, rather than as the fight to create a level playing field and establish social equality between men and women.

The feminism of the sixties with its leftist bias, and its commitment to equal rights legislation, its demands for the state to lend a hand, for equal pay, for childcare, maternity leave, and control over fertility – for contraception and abortion – for "a woman's right to choose", and for lesbian emancipation, is not for Sarah Palin and her 'conservative feminism'. Instead, she wants to promote the traditional values, virtues, and preoccupations, associated with the lives of women in a society dominated by men, as a new form of assertive 'feminism'. It is "conservative" because it opposes fundamental change and it is "feminist" because it extends its general conservative ethos specifically to the circumstances of most working class and middle class women in America.

There are a great many votes to be had by pursuing such a strategy and Sarah Palin knows only too well that she will risk nothing at all by depicting herself as a 'conservative feminist' or as a soccer mom with little or

no knowledge of international affairs or the concerns of the liberal elite in New England or Washington DC. She's a tough conservative feminist fighting for middle class Americans; Wonder Woman could do no better.

Hilary on the other hand, is fatally undermined in the Wonder Woman stakes by her traditional role as the wife of Bill; Hilary is the wife of a cheat and serial philanderer, the wife of a man who has, nevertheless, helped to propel her career ever onwards, and ever upwards. Hilary is admittedly tough, sophisticated, and smart, but perhaps she is a little too smart, and a little too much aligned with the liberal elite for her own good. In any event, is she even her own woman? Unlike Sarah, she hasn't gone it alone, nor has she insisted upon maintaining her femininity. Is she even a mother? (Chelsea Clinton notwithstanding).

As Sarah Palin presses forward her political career and her bid for the White House over the next couple of years there will no doubt be a struggle over the meaning of the word "feminism" as people seek to deny the right of Republican women to be feminists. The complicated history of the women's movement in America, and elsewhere, in which prejudices concerning class and race among women became inextricably tangled in the battle for the franchise, for contraception, and for education, will tend to be forgotten as the liberal-left lays exclusive claim to the word "feminism" as the name for the struggle to end the domination of society by men.

In this, the liberal-left women will be entirely right. Palin's 'conservative feminist identity' is not in any sense aimed at the emancipation of women; it is instead the celebration of Wonder Woman, Rosie the Riveter, and Annie Oakley. It is the celebration of exceptional women as compensation for the subaltern position of the vast majority of women at work and at home.