

Images of women in the popular culture  
publications of Fiction House, 1941-19521

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English  
Major: English (Literature)

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa  
1991

I would like to acknowledge the help  
of Dr. Virginia Allen and Dr. David B. Owen  
for their help with my thesis, and especially  
Dr. Charles Loring Silet who not only  
understood my appreciation for comic books  
but joined in. I would also like to thank  
Elizabeth Howard, Robert Sparks, Nick and Laura  
Furiak, and Michael Scott, my father.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Topic	1
CHAPTER 1	5
Graphic Narrative Leading to Comic Books	5
The Development of the Modern Comic Book	10
The "Good Girl" Image in Comic Books	22
The Fiction House Publishing Company	35
CHAPTER 2	42
Methodologies for the Study of Comic Books	42
CHAPTER 3	53
Mass Media Images of Women during the 1940s	53
Images of Women in Comic Books during the 1940s	61
Images of Women in Fiction House Comic Books	68
Images of Women in <u>Rangers of Freedom Comics</u>	71
CHAPTER 4	77
The First Period In <u>Rangers</u>	77
The Second Period	85
The Third Period	91
The Fourth Period	132
CONCLUSION	141
NOTES	146
BIBLIOGRAPHY	155

## Introduction

When comic books came into their own in the late 1930s, children, adolescents, and, soon, adults found a popular art form that challenged their imaginations in a new and acute way. Movies left little for the imagination to fill in, while books and radio left rather a lot. Comics books, however, provided both words and pictures but still required the input of the reader.

Comic books, like other forms, function using particular set of conventions. The comic book reader must fill in the characters' movements from panel to panel (a comic book panel is a single drawing--there are usually three to eight panels per page). In a single panel, a forward may kick a soccer ball, be assisted, the ball fly past a leaping goalie and into the goal, and the crowd respond (Figure 1). Time passes not only between panels but within them. The action starts at the left of the panel and travels right; the players at left react to the kicker and the player at far right reacts to the goal. The path of the ball, described by parabolic lines, guides the eye across the illustration. The narrative box at the top provides exposition and the speech balloon at the bottom comments upon the image as a whole--all this to extract the meaning from one image. Readers must look very closely at the comic book in order to "read" it successfully.



Figure 1

Roy of the Rovers (IPC Magazines: 1978)

The comic book as a form has long been ignored because not only is it popular culture, its audience is adolescent, separate from the adults who occasionally analyze popular forms. Yet no cultural creation exists in a vacuum; comic books reacted to, helped create, and perpetuated, in ways both obvious and subtle, the concerns of the time. During the 1940s, the whole of American ideology was bipolar. Our purposes were good and those purposes that were not ours were evil. Popular culture served that ideology well because it usually presents a bipolar conflict. It operates on the creation of difference, the "other."

In this work, I will examine the comic book form closely, in particular, Rangers of Freedom Comics, published by Fiction House from 1941 to 1952. Rangers is notable because women characters became important to its stories soon after its inception. In Rangers' 11-year run, its presentation of women can be divided into four periods. In the first period, female characters are used almost entirely as plot devices, someone for villains to torment and male heroes to rescue. In the second period, women are described as powerful, but their strength is undercut narratively. By the third period, however, women characters dominate the comic book and the characters within its stories. Women assume leadership roles, fighting alongside and often in front of male soldiers and adventurers. In the last period, in the early 1950s, female characters are pushed back into subordinate roles. One purpose of my study is to explore how the evolution of female characters in Rangers reflected the changes women were actually experiencing in a society which had been forced, because of the war, to admit its reliance on women's competence.

Comic books, though full of words, are primarily a visual medium. Throughout the 1940s, an idealized presentation of women dominated comic books. The female form was used as a sexual object, its features exaggerated. It was another tool used to establish the weakness of women--except in Rangers. Though Fiction House was well-known for using the idealized

vision of women, it combined the art with strong images. My other purpose for this work is to explore this anomalous image of a competent and visually idealized woman and to make suggestions as to how this image fit into the ambiguous attitudes of the society that spawned it.

In the first chapter I will provide background, the history and development of the comic book form necessary for placing this study of Rangers in context. The second chapter will survey the criticism that comic books have produced and place my work in critical context. In the third chapter, I will focus on the changing role of women in the 1940s and the images of women produced in comic books as a whole, in Fiction House comic books, and in Rangers. My in depth analysis of the the presentation of women in Rangers will constitute the fourth chapter, focusing on the third period. I hope to place comic books in a cultural context, to show that the form has an agenda, and that the agenda proposed by Rangers was a subversive one, promoting the image of women as strong and beautiful, adopting strong tradionally "male" traits and demonstrating the strength of traditionally weak "female" traits.

## Chapter 1

### I

The marriage of word and image in order to convey meaning is not a new device, nor even old; it is ancient. In the 1900s, E.H. Gombrich noted that the art of the comic strip, more than any other form the progenitor of the comic book, was allowing the viewer to fill in the gaps left by the artist.<sup>1</sup>

Using that definition, the comic strip was in its natal form when early man illustrated his hunting exploits or religious concerns on the walls of caves. Comic strips and books are, fundamentally, series of narrative images, and the stringing together of images as an innovation commenced simultaneously with civilization.

As early as 2000 to 4000 B.C., the Sumerians visually told stories, this one about a king's celebration before a war (Figure 1). The Greeks added more form and style by surrounding their vases with narrative depictions of myths and battles. The Roman Column of Trajan portrays the military triumphs of Emperor Trajan in strip form, spiraling up the column for over 600 feet of illustrations.(Figure 2) After the Battle of Hastings, the Bayeux tapestry was woven to commemorate the event (Figure 3). Also in strip form, the Bayeux Tapestry introduced words, short legends describing the action depicted.



Figure 1

Sumerian Mosaic



Figure 2

The Roman Column of Trajan



Figure 3

The Bayeux Tapestry

It was in the 1700s that the comic strip basically reached its present form. Englishman Thomas Rowlandson is the most notable of the early comic strip artists (Figure 4).<sup>2</sup> In this strip, the participants express themselves through "speech balloons," a convention that now dominates the form. Also notable is this strip's political comment on the uneasy coalition between two British political forces of the time, Lord North and Charles James Fox. Rowlandson was unhappy with the joining of forces and by describing the author of the marriage as Satan, Rowlandson encourages the comic strip reader to agree with him. Rowlandson's work establishes the form as not merely descriptive but prescriptive as well, an important precedent. After Rowlandson, the popularity of comic strips mushroomed in England. Monthly magazines of comic strips were sold along with newspapers; one, Punch, started in 1841, survives today.<sup>3</sup>

Swiss Schoolmaster Rodolphe Topffer, a friend of Goethe, in the early 1800s anticipated the development of the comic book with his extended comic strip narratives such as Le Docteur Festus, a satire on the Faust story, and his satire about romantic courtship, M. Jabon (Figure 5).<sup>4</sup> Topffer's work, created largely for the instruction and amusement of his pupils, was unpublished until the end of his life, when Goethe encouraged him to publish.<sup>5</sup>

The evolution of the form did not begin in earnest in the United States until the 1890s. In 1896, Joseph Pulitzer's



Figure 4

### The Loves of the Fox and the Badger (1784)



Figure 5

### M. Jabon (1846)



Figure 6

"The Yellow Kid" The New York World (1897)

New York World tested a formerly elusive yellow ink on a comic drawn by Richard Outcault quickly named by the public "The Yellow Kid" (Figure 6).<sup>6</sup> The Yellow Kid was a bald, precocious child who both spoke through thought balloons and had messages written on his over-long yellow T-shirt. The feature became very popular and in 1897, after William Randolph Hearst bought Outcault away from Pulitzer, "The Yellow Kid" strips were reprinted in The Yellow Kid Magazine, the first such collection of strips into one publication.<sup>7</sup>

Outcault's "Yellow Kid" only lasted about a year, but it threw the doors open wide for the form. Rudolph Dirks soon introduced to Hearst's New York Journal "The Katzenjammer Kids," a strip which became so pervasive in the newspapers as

well as collected into magazine form that many remain today and are common sales at comic book conventions.<sup>8</sup> Collections of "The Katzenjammer Kids" and other comic strip features looked little like the comic book today; they were larger and had hard covers. This practice of reprinting comic strips lasted and gained popularity<sup>9</sup>. In 1917, such an anthology was published with a title introducing the now ubiquitous name, Comic Book,<sup>10</sup> and the shortlived Comic Monthly became the first regularly published anthology of strips in 1921, though neither resembled the modern form. The form thrived in this manner for the next decade.

## II

The path to images as unlikely as those found in Rangers is a complicated one. It involves the depression, comic strips, movies, advertisements, radio, pulp magazines, the role of women during and after World War II, etc. . . .

Until 1929, newspaper comic strips were humorous presentations of daily life. Around that time, however, daily life became a subject most Americans had no desire to be reminded about; the depression was deepening and the richest and the poorest, both commonly the subject of comic strip humor, were salt too close to a national wound. There was little funny in the "funnies." In 1929 "Tarzan" and "Buck Rogers," followed by "Dick Tracy," "The Phantom," and "Terry

and the Pirates" the next year, illustrated a growing need for escapism, a desire to be in the jungle or in the stars where conflicts were still simple and a good, strong man could make his own way.

The modern comic book is a product of the same idea as putting prizes in a Cracker Jack box. In the early 1930s, manufacturers included bound reprints of newspaper comic strips with detergent, shoes, and a host of other items. These giveaways were so popular that a few entrepreneurs believed and were proved correct that comic books could be sold in groceries and newspapers stands for a dime. In 1935, New Comics successfully began the new trend of printing material created specifically for the comic book form. In 1937, Detective Comics followed comic strips by changing tenor from humorous to adventure/drama. The "Golden Age" of comic books, the most popular definition of which is from 1938 to 1954, began with the publishing in 1938 of Action Comics, introducing Superman. Superman was almost entirely responsible for the immense growth of the comic book industry over the next few years. The coming of Superman and his innumerable imitators heralded what must be the zenith of escapism. Superman was alien, more than human, and had adopted all "American" qualities as if he had been programmed. He became an American who was always right and nearly omnipotent, an attractive concept for a troubled America. The super-human was a new idea to the comic books' audience.

These characters had special powers and invulnerabilities that allowed them to correct problems cleanly and easily. There were no arguments or justifications needed. Might claimed to be right, but in effect, it did not matter.

The growing fear that America would not be able to avoid participating in the war changed the activities of super heroes.<sup>11</sup> As attention paid to economics waned in the face of war, the heroes began to leave their adventures on distant planets, to stop fighting gothic underworld crime battles and mad scientists, and focused on thwarting fifth columnists or fighting thinly-disguised, generic European fascists or Eastern militarists. An escapist reality was not necessary when heroes had the end-of-society-as-we-know-it to contend with. Patriotic figures such as Captain America and Uncle Sam were created a year before Pearl Harbor, and the December, 1941, issue of National Comics predicted the attack on Pearl Harbor a month before the event.<sup>12</sup>

At the commencement of war, comic books changed almost instantly and quite dramatically. Images of Germans and Japanese once slightly disguised became explicit; comic books wholeheartedly joined in the Allied propaganda machine.<sup>13</sup> Even during the "last good war," American ideology was bipolar. The differentiation of "them" from "us" was integrally important. With all constraints removed by the reality of war, real death and maiming and hate, comics books were not only allowed but encouraged to present Germans and

Japanese as leering, evil subhumans. Golden Age artist C.C. Beck, creator of Captain Marvel, said, "All the heroes had to be out there stopping bullets and tweaking Hitler's nose and punching Hirohito in the teeth and everything else. We had to do that. We were ordered [by editors]. We had to do it for propaganda purposes."<sup>14</sup> The Japanese were usually pictured as short, bespectacled, yellow and sometimes greenish, drooling, either hugely buckteethed or fanged, and with claws for fingernails while the Germans were usually pictured as obese, monocled, scowling brutes in leather.

The permutations of such biased descriptions are endless; only the non-human presentation is mandatory (Figure 7). In Figure 7, the requirement is met by making the German half machine and the Japanese a devolved creature. The half machine is an attempt to create the same amount of difference between the average American and the average German as there is perceived between the American and Japanese races. The American image is actually included for easy reference as to what a normal American looks like (never mind that he is wearing an animal skin). Comic books also created the difference between American and enemy through plot and text. In a "Rangers of Freedom" story, a member of the adolescent rangers declares, "Those Japs are as heartless as wild beast" while he is in the process of shooting a few.<sup>15</sup> Such purposefully stilted and racist presentations are important because they establish that comic books developed an intention



Figure 7

Air Fighters Classics (Eclipse Comics: November 1987)

to form the thinking of their readers. The comic book declared itself a didactic form.

That declaration is important because in taking a stance about the war, comic books as a form became a cog in the propaganda machine. As propaganda, comic books trained their

audience to respond to it as a didactic form. The comic book reader was trained to believe in the images of the enemy presented, but there were many images included in comic books, and these images rode on the didactic coattails of war-time propaganda: images of women, of negroes, etc. . . . That training did not automatically dissipate after the end of the war, and the trained readers took in all of the changing images of women not only as stories but, to some extent, as church members at a sermon.

While the comic book was developing in intent, its audience was changing just as substantially. With 16 million Americans sent overseas during the war, a great audience was created that longed for the artifacts of home.<sup>16</sup> Though critics of the form have contended that the overseas popularity was because comic books are small and easy to ship and because servicemen were desperate for anything to read,<sup>17</sup> it is important to note that ten times the comic books were bought at post exchanges than the combined sales of Life, Reader's Digest, and The Saturday Evening Post.<sup>18</sup> In 1942, 150 million comic books were purchased; even more significantly, an average of four people read each book.<sup>19</sup> This means that 400 million comic book readings took place in 1942, and the number rose. Most of these comic books were propaganda and served to reinforce the belief in the righteousness of the American cause and the inhumanity of the enemy to those most concerned with the pragmatics of war.

"We" were the good guys; "they" were the bad guys, and the good guys always won. This change in the demographics of comic book readership set up a series of paradoxes. The editors, writers, and artists had to try to accommodate the diverse conventions required by adult male servicemen as an audience in the same work that an audience of adolescents was addressed. It was a task attempted but impossible to accomplish. The adult male soldier wanted not just reminders of purpose, but reminders of what he had left at home, girlfriends, wives, home, all presented in an idealized fashion to increase the desire to protect. "Sex sells" is a truism applicable even in war. The adolescent and pre-adolescent audience was interested only in a superior male figure drubbing the bad guys, but they were given both. Any real accommodation of the older audience was bound to make demands of the younger one that its members were temporarily ill-equipped to meet. The messages intended to influence male soldiers were also received by a more vulnerable audience and were certain to expand the younger audience's views.

Just as adapting to the war caused a significant change in readership of comic books, the change in readership immediately began to cause changes in the content of comic books. Women comic book characters up to this point had been largely used as either plot devices or were merely decorative. Female characters were included in order to provide some pretty young woman for the protagonist to save. Even

Superman's Lois Lane, a competent, aggressive reporter, was in constant need of Superman's assistance; her bumbling, aggressive as it was, often served as Superman's motivation in a story. A few female characters during the war, however, were increasingly emphasized and new characters were introduced. Dr. William Moulton Marston, a psychologist and early and believer in the women's movement, decided that there were plenty of role models in the comics for young men, but none of note for young women.<sup>20</sup> So he and D.C. Comics introduced Wonder Woman in All-Star Comics, November 1941; in January 1942, Sensation Comics began its run featuring Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman was powerful, independent, noble, and gentle. Wrote Marston, "Women represent love; men represent force. Man's use of force without love brings evil and unhappiness. Wonder Woman proves that women are superior to men because they have love in addition to force".<sup>21</sup> Wonder Woman and her followers used force, but only in defense, and never to kill; much of her efforts were to avoid conflict, albeit in an heroic manner. Once again the comic book form is used instructively.

Once war-generated material ran out, new material filled the comic books, and in 1946 or 1947, depending upon the publisher, a changing audience forced comic books as a whole to change. The myriad imitators of Superman failed, because the new, victorious American public could take only so much of the kinds of adventure that seemed fitting during the war:



Figure 8

Captain Marvel (DC Comics: 1946)

"Who needed a superman when we, with our atomic bombs, had become supermen?"<sup>22</sup> Into the late 1940s, adventure comics books tended to stay on Earth and in known climates. Even stories of fantastic proportions had their basis in the concerns of reality. Crime comics ascended, especially the ostensibly "true crime comics," a tell-tale sign of the new desire even for adventure to be rooted in the real world. Along with the crime comics, many adventure stories tended toward the scientific; after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, visions of science gone awry were in the public consciousness. The superheroes that survived often found themselves narrowly averting nuclear holocaust (Figure 8). Comic books not only drew nearer to reality in subject matter, but the stories also

began to have a sharper edge. Crime figures often killed good cops and the viewer was likely to see the criminal executed for it. The possible results of nuclear war were often used to stimulate the vicarious but not unreal fear needed by escapist literature. Readers found themselves closer to the conflict than when superheroes fought space creatures.

In 1947, though the number of titles published had been reduced by a third, the number of total comic books bought remained the same.<sup>23</sup> Ninety-six per cent of boys and 91 per cent of girls between the ages of six and 11 steadily read comics, as did 87 per cent of boys and 81 per cent of girls between 12 and 17 years old.<sup>24</sup> By 1946, the number of comic book published annually had risen to 480 million, meaning comic book readings approached 2 billion.<sup>25</sup> Of all comic book readers, 54 per cent were adults over 20.<sup>26</sup> Comics were ubiquitous. Hundreds of different titles reached the stands every month.

A pair of trends particularly reflected the shifting audience of comics on the late 1940s: romance comics and working girl comics. Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, two of the most prolific comic book producers and creators of some of the more popular superhero titles, created Young Romance as a direct appeal to young adult women. Joe Simon stated, "There was a need for adult oriented comics. I remembered back to my childhood to the love magazines, like True Confessions, that my parents used to read. That stuck with me; how popular this

type of material was. That's what led to realistic romance comics."<sup>27</sup> The romance comics typically presented stories of women who fought through familial or social problems to find love. The working girl comic books, conceived at the end of the war, found their popularity late in the decade. Titles like Nellie the Nurse, Millie the Model, or Patsy Walker told stories of beautiful women who were also successful at careers. Characterization of the main players was more important than plot in these comics, and the female characters managed to maintain control of their own lives.

In 1950, the creation of EC Comics signalled the end of the Golden Age. EC Comics produced a line of horror comics that presented extremely gory plots and pictures that caused a resurgence of the concerns voiced in the early 1940s about comic books causing juvenile delinquency, communism, and a host of other social evils. The war, and comic books' participation in the propaganda machine, had successfully overshadowed those concerns, but the horror comics and the increasing intensity of the crime comics created an environment perfect for such critics as Dr. Frederic Wertham (Seduction of the Innocent), who made a career out of describing comic books' affect on children. One of Wertham's main issues was the good girl image. In truth, many of the illustrations of the horror comics were frightening (Figure 9). The typical cover takes the bondage image from the early 1940s to an entirely new level. The villains are

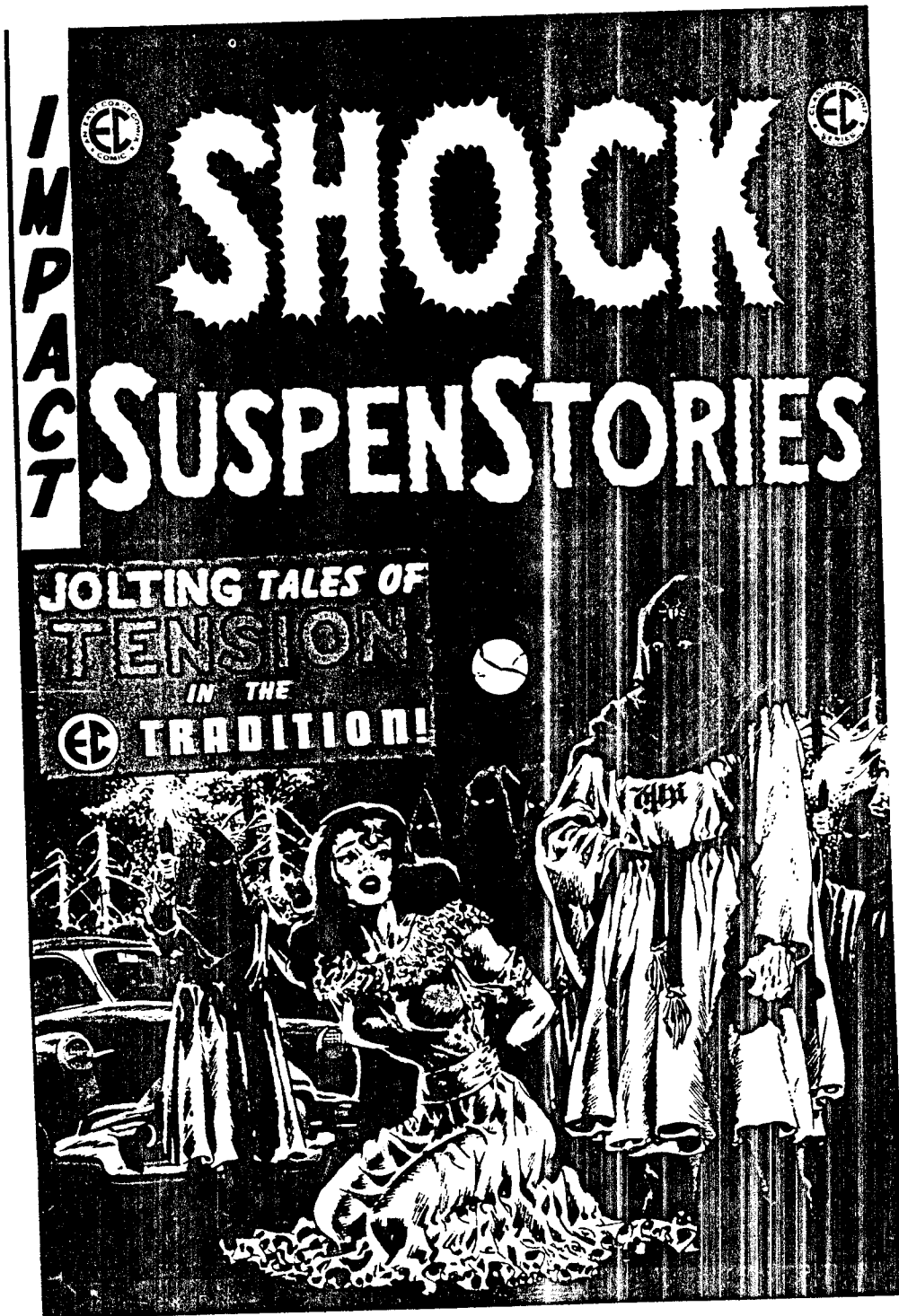


Figure 9

Shock Suspense Stories (EC: 1953)

part of America, and the danger is much closer to the average American women than the Japanese were during the war. These are Americans terrorizing Americans, and, unlike the earlier images, what is prophesied on the cover often finds fruition in the book. The new comic book mentality, a mentality that thrived on the explicit depiction of pain in contrast to implied depictions earlier, allowed the eye to be punctured, the woman to be burned, and presented the maiming the earlier works only hinted at.

In 1954, during the heyday of the McCarthy era, a Senate subcommittee met to discuss the influence of comic books, and, as a result, the comic book industry willingly adopted the comics code, limiting what could appear with rules like "All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted."<sup>28</sup> Comic book creators had felt the impending pressure of this situation coming for a few years, and, while many comic books revelled in their gory images, some were toned down. After the new rules were adopted, much of the creative fire left the industry.

### III

When Marston created Wonder Woman, he created a character designed to raise the self-image of female readers; however, his creation was a response to the more popular presentation

of women, a presentation intensified by the war. "Good girl art" is a relatively recent term devised by comic book collectors to define the most pervasive trend in presentation of women during and after the war. Good girl art was comic books' answer to the needs that also drove the pulp fiction industry and pin-up art. Good girls are always beautiful; their clothing, if it has not been stripped off to reveal lacy lingerie, is either meager by choice or has been torn to reveal cleavage and thigh. They are usually bound, often with their elbows tied behind their backs in order to emphasize their improbably large breasts (well-detailed), which are accompanied by equally unlikely narrow waists and long legs (Figure 10).<sup>29</sup> This Rangers cover is representative of the genre of good girl art. Covers such as this are often called "headlight" covers by collectors, because of the protruding breasts. The voluptuous woman is in dire need of assistance from her tormentors, and in the top right corner a hero is about to come and rescue her, guns blazing. The good girl during the war is a powerless creature, needing to be saved by a powerful male, and she is always saved. This highlighted to the serviceman the necessity of his saving the day for America and things American, in this case, beautiful women. By extension, he was doing what the hero in the story did. The possibilities of torture and death offered by the cover were never allowed to happen. Such covers enticed a reader who, through experience with the form, knew that such a harmful



Figure 10

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1946)



Figure 11

World War II poster (1942)

situation would not find fruition, but read to see how it was avoided--but always with a little fear. The sexual energy in the illustration is obvious, but, interestingly enough, the woman herself is normally given no sexual identity, either artistically or through the plot. She is clearly sexual, but only in appearance. She does not act upon any of her own desires. She is sexually passive. All sexual overtones are created around her. Sexuality does imply power and it was necessary to make her powerless, more in need of salvation. Empowering sexuality was reserved for the savior.

The terrorized woman image was an accepted archetype in American society and surfaced in more than just comic books--it was governmentally subsidized (Figure 11). Figure 11

uses the same comic book Japanese stereotype; his stooped frame and dark skin contrasts the whiteness of the obviously Anglo woman. The woman, equally stereotypically, is totally powerless. This illustration serves to encourage both sexes: the male soldier fights to protect, the rape of one of "our" women being the ultimate emasculation; the woman supports the war effort out of sheer fear and self-preservation. That the woman is naked and portrayed in every detail parallels the sexual exploitation of the good girl image. Were the comic book publishers led to believe they could get away with nudity, they certainly would have used it.

The Fiction House publishing company is often afforded the dubious honor of originating the good girl image in comic book form, but other publishers quickly followed and expanded upon the image. Fiction House and a few other comic book producers spent the 1930s publishing pulp magazines. The changing pulp industry provided much of the financial backing and creative direction for an emerging comic book industry.<sup>30</sup> The Shadow and Doc Savage provided paradigms that the artists in the young comic book field had read and borrowed from extensively.<sup>31</sup> These magazines had covers and inside illustrations picturing overly endowed women in many sorts of duress, often torture (Figure 12). Pulp magazines covers and inside illustrations were usually dark, gothic images. Figure 12 presages the images of torture and sacrifice that would dominate much early good girl imagery.

# SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

July, 1936

Vol. 3, No. 3

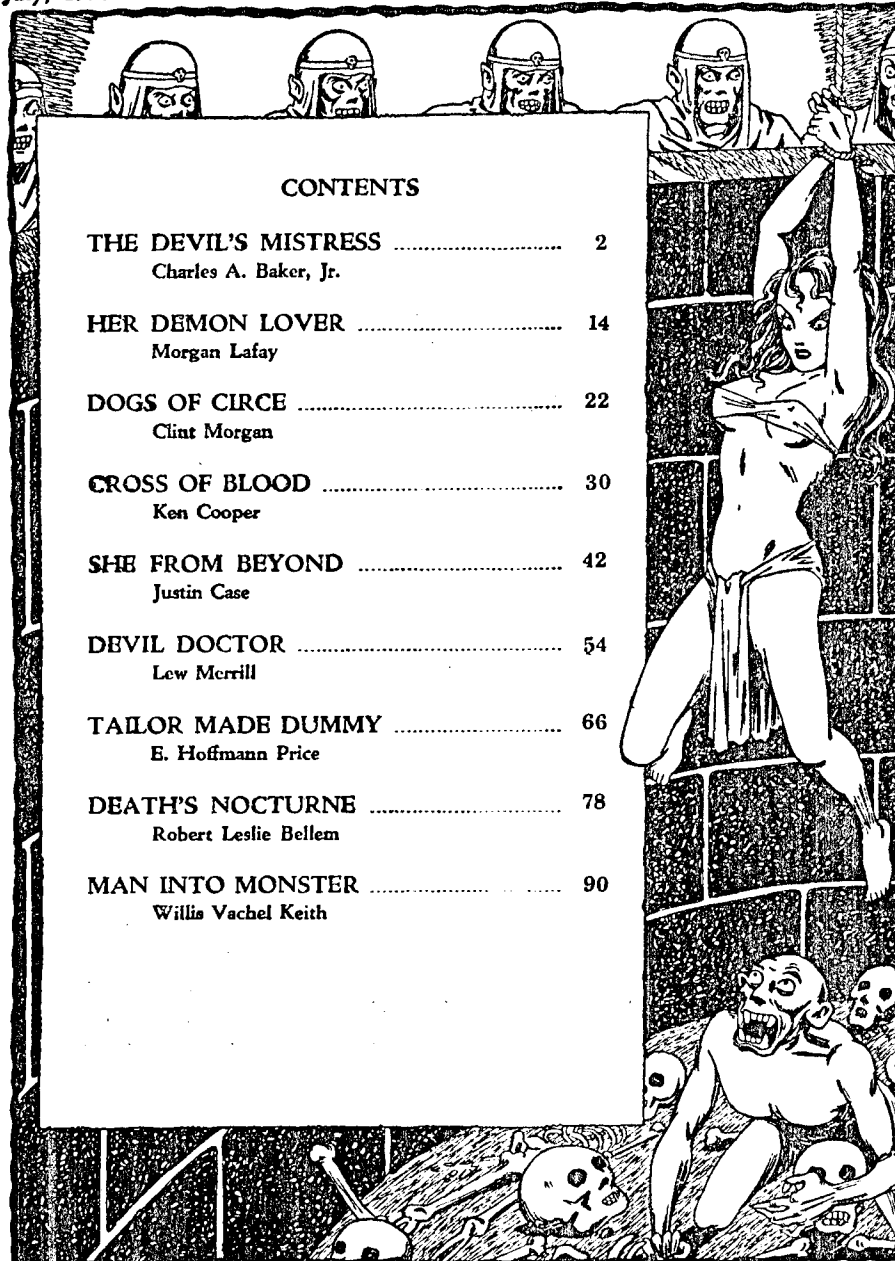


Figure 12

Spicy Mystery Stories (Armor-Donenfield: 1936)

The story is the important element but voyeuristic needs are fulfilled, as are escapist ones with a story entitled, "The Devil's Mistress." When the war started and comic books became open to extreme images of women, Fiction House used the opportunity to translate its pulp magazines images into the more brightly colored form (Figure 13). In the comic book illustration, the woman is again at risk, but added is the propagandistic element of painting the Japanese as preying on innocents.

This use of the female image to encourage the male soldier was an established convention (Figure 14). This Army poster appeals not just to duty and patriotism but also to sex. American men through this country's history have fought to protect an idealized vision of womanhood and purity, a vision highlighted by a nearly transparent dress. The good girl image became pervasive in the visual media during the war. The Zeigfield Follies movie poster (Figure 15) presents good girls any comic book in the genre would have been proud to use. Pin-up art, photographs and illustrations, covered barracks walls and reminded soldiers idealistically of what they were fighting for. Comic book artists, along with everyone else, were drafted and set to work using their talents for the war effort. Bill Ward created Torchy, which was originally published as a strip in an Army newspaper.<sup>32</sup> Milton Caniff's Male Call, also produced specifically for the military, was very popular with overseas troops and its Miss



Figure 13

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: August 1945)

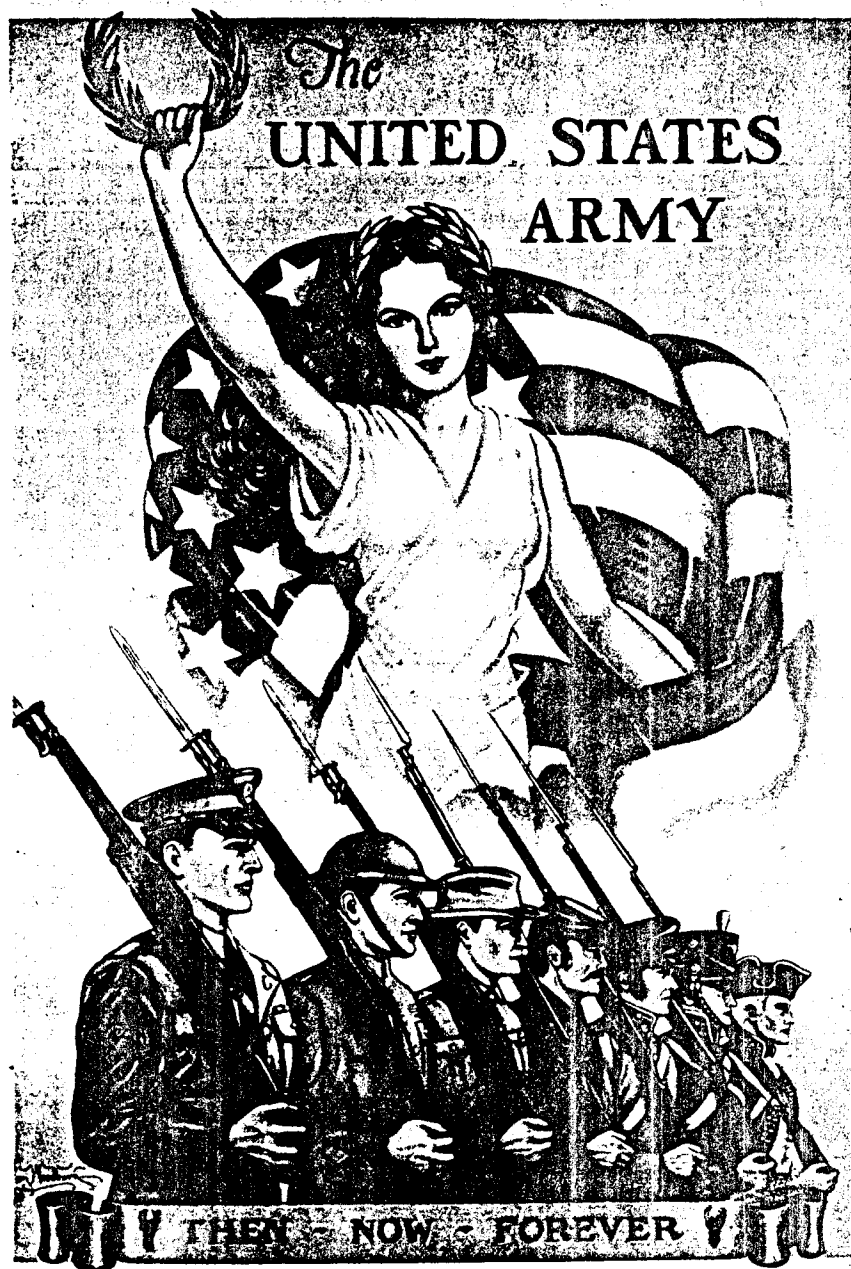


Figure 14

World War II poster



Figure 15

MGM movie poster (1945)



Figure 16

"Male Call" (1943)



Figure 17

World War II poster

Lace was hung in the barracks as pin-up art next to Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth (fig. 16). The propaganda posters acknowledged the comic books and the good girl image, using the comic book good girl conventions to promote the Glider Troops (fig. 17). This image of women was pervasive, accepted in dozens of mediums. The good girl image, voluptuous, in need

of saving, and used as a patriotic catalyst, lasted until a year or so after the war, until the comic book publishers' backlog of prepared stories ran out.

Just as comics changed in the late 'forties, the good girl image changed and expanded. Crime comics thrived on the good girl image, creating titles like Crimes by Women simply as a vehicle for presenting it. In the crime comic books, the good girls were alluring but dangerous; often the female character who was by nature good, a wife or sweetheart, was attractive but plain, while the voluptuous gun moll often was ruinous to honest men. The crime comic books gave power to the good girls, but usually at the cost of their virtue. The female characters in romance and working girl comics were often good girls, which is interesting considering the intended female audience. Good girls also became heroes instead of victims. Jungle maidens flourished, as did private eyes. Good girls were no longer merely pin-ups in need of rescue. Most importantly, good girls began to assume unmistakable sexual identities of their own. This Phantom Lady cover is considered by collectors and comic book historians to be the zenith of good girl art (Figure 18). Though bound and being approached by surly, menacing goons, the heroine seems unperturbed in her efforts to look seductive--straight at the reader of the comic book, stepping out of the story and into the libido of the reader. The costume she wears, never justified, could not contain the



Figure 18

Phantom Lady (Fox: April 1948)

wearer during any strenuous activity. This cover also illustrates a common if not pervasive good girl paradox: though bound and in trouble, Phantom Lady looks strong, in control. Being a continuing character, Phantom Lady could not, the readers knew, be seriously hurt; she would prevail.

## IV

Fiction House switched its concerns from pulp magazines to comic books in 1938 when it published Jumbo Comics, and earned the honor of introducing the first real heroine, Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, a character that did not take on many of the good girl conventions until 1941. Even then, Sheena was both a participant and a notable exception to many of the good girl conventions (Figure 19). Sheena was blonde, athletic, and full-figured; she wore a leopard skin outfit that accentuated her legs, bare midriff, and breasts. Sheena traveled with a male companion she obviously felt for, and whom she was continually saving. She was neither powerless nor did she lack sexual identity. She also lived in the jungle, even during the war when most comic books left the jungle for the frontline. She spent her time protecting the native peoples in the never specified area of Africa she inhabited. Her image, though in the good girl genre, was uncommon during the war, but it did foreshadow the direction the good girl image would eventually take.

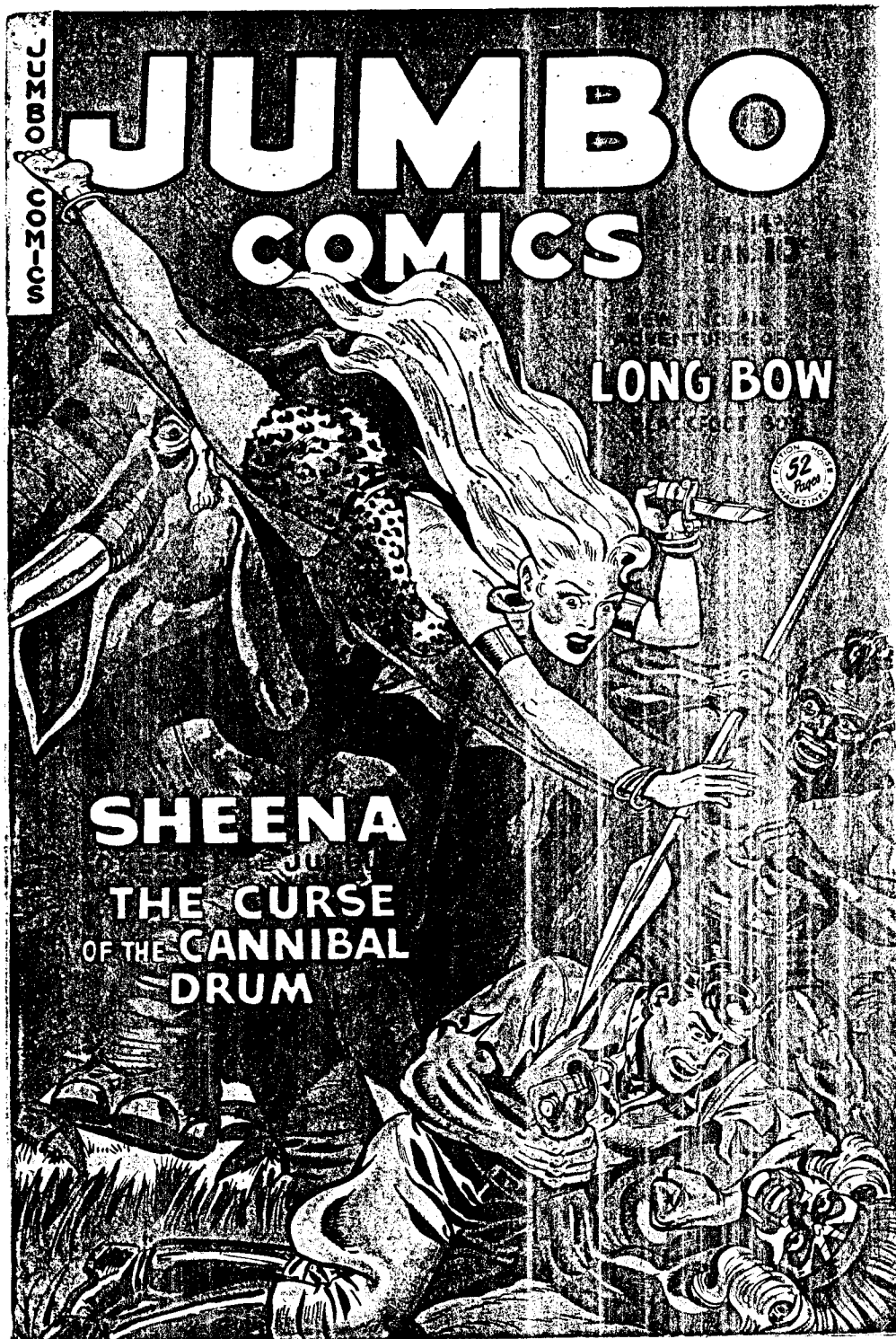


Figure 19

Jumbo Comics (Fiction House: January 1951)

Sheena was a creation of Jerry Iger and Will Eisner and their newborn "shop," which would grow to be one of the most prolific producers in the industry. Many comic book publishers used these independent establishments to do most of the creative work for their publications, and "shop" is an apt name. The comic book shops produced the wares with an assembly line mentality. While such characters as Superman or Batman were steadily produced by the same few people, in the shops "the employees were given extremely specific jobs and every completed comic went through the hands of an editor, art director, scripter, cover penciller, cover inker, interior penciller, interior inker, background penciller, background inker, letterer, colorist, proofreader, and 'clean-up boy' (an apprentice who erased pencil lines)." <sup>33</sup> Often any number of these tasks could be combined, but each worker had little identification with the product.

Fiction House widened this distance between artist and creation by adopting its pulp fiction convention of either not crediting work or assigning to a fictional name, such as "E. Lectron," "Ima Slob," or the more respectable "W. Morgan Thomas". <sup>34</sup> Much to the dismay of collectors and historians, this practice makes identifying particular works with particular artists difficult, with some notable exceptions.

Considering the images of women commonly found in Fiction House comic books, it is interesting to note its uncommon practice of commonly hiring women to work in the shops (as

well as blacks). Fiction House employed about 24 during the war years, which is at least four times more than any other publisher or shop.<sup>32</sup> Women drew, inked, and scripted stories. Of particular importance is Ruth Roche, who often wrote under the pseudonym, "Rod Roche," in order not to offend male sensibilities. Roche joined the Eisner-Iger shop in 1940 at age twenty. She soon became an assistant editor, and, when Eisner left to produce his own character, "The Spirit," Roche became co-editor and eventually partner. Her editorial influence was considerable.<sup>36</sup> Little else is known about Roche, though she did often write "Sheena" and her own creation, "Senorita Rio," who were two of the three most powerful, active women Fiction House had conceived (Rangers' Firehair is the third). The male artists eventually returned from the war and resumed their positions, and the women artists generally were forced or found their way back home.

It was during the war years that Fiction House established the good girl image that would be taken up so quickly by the other publishers. Rangers and Fight Comics were introduced at the beginning of the war purposefully to appeal to patriotism at home and especially abroad, as a direct appeal to the armed forces in Fight #1 attests.<sup>37</sup> Yet just as Fiction House differed in its staff and the images of women it presented, the publishing house presented a slightly different version of the war than was popular in most comic books. While most comic books pictured the American

soldier as almost invulnerable, miraculously avoiding injury while the enemy was destroyed, Fiction House often portrayed American soldiers being wounded and even killed, though the Allies always won the battle.

The first several issues of Rangers were filled with mainly war stories, with little feminine involvement, but Fiction House's anthology format and the nature of comic books as a whole soon led the publisher to amend that situation. Each Fiction House publication had four to eight illustrated stories included, as well as a couple non-illustrated stories. This format allowed a publisher leeway in maintaining the popularity of the book; with some experimenting to find the culprit characters, one or two could be replaced without utterly disrupting the book. Also, from its beginnings, the comic book has had a tradition of listening very closely to its readers. Each comic either had a fan club or a continuously run address where letters could be sent. Letters about the current issue would be received by the publisher almost immediately, and these letters were listened to with greedy earnestness. If there was a clamor either for or against a certain character, that character could be highlighted, have his or her own series, or be gone by the next issue, published every month to two months. After just a few issues of Rangers and Fight Comics, the war stories took a back seat to the good girl image, or were at least combined, giving the soldier some incredibly displaced good girl person

to rescue. Soldiers did not accept replays of the stories they was involved in; he needed and was given variety, and variety for him was often simply a female image.

Fiction House led the industry in expanding the good girl image after the war. No longer were the good girls pictured on the cover about to be tortured or killed; now they were doing the killing (fig. 20). Firehair, at bottom, a white, red-haired "daughter of the Sioux," led this revolt. This represents a major shift in an understanding of women's efficacy.

It is interesting that in the early 'fifties, when the comics code loomed large, Fiction House chose flight over fight. Firehair had been dominating Rangers covers and the inside material for several years, but in the face of the code, Fiction House buried her and once again began to highlight war stories, this time about the Korean war. The buying public, however, did not appreciate a creation they had directed through their letter writing and buying habits being taken out of their control. After four poorly received war issues, Fiction House ceased publishing Rangers in early 1952. Fiction House's other magazines had already or would soon succumb, and its most popular, Jungle Comics, followed in 1954, the year the comics code took affect.



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**SIX**  
**OF THE COMICS!**

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RANGERS COMICS, No. 47, June, 1949. Published every other month by Flying Stories, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. T. F. Neust, Pres.; J. P. Byrne, Mgr. Editor: Seymour S. Schulz. Editor: De-mired as second-class matter Dec. 2, 1948, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1979. Contents copyrighted, 1949, by Flying Stories, Inc. Yearly subscription in U. S. \$ 4.00; Foreign \$ 5.00. Single copies 10¢ in U. S. For advertising rates: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.

**52**  
**Pages**  
**FICTION HOUSE**  
**MAGAZINES**

**NEXT ISSUE OF RANGERS COMICS (No. 48, AUG.) ON SALE AT YOUR NEWSSTAND JUNE 5th.**

Figure 20

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: June 1949)

## Chapter 2

Since the form's beginnings in the late 1930s, comic books have spawned an abundance of writings about the form, fan-oriented and scholarly; however, few, even of the academic works, either sufficiently explicate the workings of the form or critically analyze the texts of comic books and place them in any historical context, or even attempt to make any conclusion that looks outside of the text itself, an important step when considering popular culture artifacts.<sup>1</sup> The resurgent popularity of comic books in the early 1970s brought with it an increase in scholarly attention. The criticism of the 1970s and 1980s often used established literary methods in its analysis of comic books and provided a foundation for the second stage of criticism which has only just emerged. In my analysis of Rangers comics, I will build on these examinations and try to place the work in a larger social context. Considering that unlike "literature," which is, at least in the academic world, often far removed from mass culture, comic books are a cultural creation very close to common escapist fantasies, an integral part of most people's lives, and considering that the members of the intended audience are usually in their formative years, a study which examines meaning in comic books should somewhere connect its findings to the form's place in society and its malleable audience.

Comic Books and America, 1945-54 (1990), by University of Oklahoma history professor William W. Savage, is the first extended work both to look at the messages of the form as well as to see comics books as reacting to and perpetuating popular attitudes. Savage's chief concern is with how comic books reflected the changes in America after World War II, specifically, after the atomic bomb. Because of the bomb, America, he finds, changed significantly, as did comic books. Before 1945, America enjoyed seeing comic book heroes performing miraculous feats and almost singlehandedly defeating an enemy which, incredibly, persisted both in the books and in reality. After the bomb and then the war's end, America could no longer be impressed by comic book feats that as a nation it had surpassed.<sup>2</sup> In response, comic books centered stories on the real concerns of the nation: nuclear war, the red menace, crime, and then Korea.

Savage's book takes the critical discussion of comic books to a new level because it institutes a simple methodology for reading comic books in reference to culture. He establishes a thesis: America grew very uncomfortable with the bomb, its use of the deadly weapon, and the growing international possession of the nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> Next, Savage explores the responses of comic books to social concerns: in comic books for young children, the bomb became just another slapstick device--sit on it and when it explodes you'll end up in Greenland.<sup>4</sup> In comic books intended for

adolescents and adults, the bomb became a friendly weapon, protecting us and killing only the enemy.<sup>5</sup> Last, Savage draws conclusions: American Culture simply refused to make the bomb an unhappy, unpleasant, or unproductive thing."<sup>6</sup> Since we had built and used the bomb first, America believed, it was an entity dedicated only to our will. Savage's methodology seems a simple process, but few have attempted it.

Considering how popular comic books were and continue to be, an analysis of exactly how we go about reading them and what the specific conventions of visual narrative are would be helpful in the study of the form. Of the works attempting this task, Will Eisner's Comics and Sequential Art (1985) is the most thorough and insightful. Eisner, who is the comic book artist most respected and imitated in the field, wrote the book while teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

For the sake of simplicity, Eisner compares the reading of comic books to the reading of a sentence (Figure 1).

The predicates of the gun-shooting and the wrestling belong to separate clauses. The subject of "gun-shooting" is the crook, and Gerhard [the victim] is the direct object. The many modifiers include the adverb "Bang, Bang" and the adjectives of visual language, such as posture, gesture, and grimace.<sup>7</sup>

Eisner divides the comic book into all of its individual elements and then explains how they work: the text, timing,



Figure 1

Comics and Sequential Art (Poorhouse Press: 1985)

imagery, the frame, and anatomy, for example. He demonstrates how the text, either in speech balloons or simply imposed over part of the illustration, can be read both as text and as a visual element. Eisner discusses the various ways individual panels are framed in order to lead the reader's eye around the

page, either for simple ease of communication or to create any number of impressions. His analysis is not interpretive, but it provides an understanding of how the form works for someone seeking to do an informed analysis of the form.

Eisner's is not the only study of comic book conventions, but it is the most intimate and thorough. When comic books enjoyed increased popularity in the early 1970s, they commanded more academic attention as well, creating three basic categories: studies of the form, literary studies, and historical studies. In 1971, Wolfgang Iser first studied how comic books are read, noting how much work the form leaves for the consumer to complete. When reading a Superman comic book, readers begin the reading knowing quite a bit about Superman's situation and world; this reading community knows that Superman is nearly omnipotent and nearly invulnerable, and that when he is not Superman, he is troubled, wimpy Clark Kent, uninteresting reporter.<sup>8</sup> Iser establishes the form as participatory, expecting input from the reader. His work is notable because it was the first to view comic books as a legitimate form for examination and the first to study the comic book as a form with its own conventions requiring specific reader response and responsibilities.

In 1985, Earle J. Coleman's helpful but thin "The Funnies, the Movies and Aesthetics", first suggested the possible theoretical similarities between comic strips, books, and cinema. Coleman treats the comic panel much like a movie



Figure 2

"Sam's Strip" Comics 5 (Reinbek: 1974)

screen, which uses all the techniques of the camera, such as panning, close-ups, and awkward angles.<sup>9</sup> Just as film depends on the qualities of the human eye filling in the movement between negatives, comic books and strips depend on the viewer filling in the motion between panels.<sup>10</sup> The most recent of the studies of comic book form is Heinz J. Weber's "Elements of Text-based and Image-based Connectedness in Comic Stories, and some Analogies to Cinema and Written Text" (1989), which specifically analyzes how meaning is carried from panel to panel, most notably by repetition of a significant word or image (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> Looking at Figure 2, the reader knows that the man pictured in the second panel is in the plane on the right in the first panel because of the repetition of the question mark. The simple repetition allows the reader to follow a distinct transition in space and focus.

Of the academic analyses of comic books, those which study comic book conventions have been the most focused. The majority of the research done on comic books has helped to legitimize the form by analyzing it in the same way literature is analyzed. The effect is usually an exploration of the various messages of a comic book with relatively little reference to the popular form's audience and the messages' possible effects on that audience. Donald Palumbo's "The Pattern of Allusions in Marvel Comics" (1989), is quite thorough in its explanation of the penchant of Marvel Comics Group to populate its comic book pages with various mythical gods as superheroes and villains and with references to biblical stories and literary references. Palumbo suggests that the allusions serve to link the known (escapist fantasy) with the unknown (the subject of the allusion) in order to present the unknown in a friendlier, reassuring fashion.<sup>12</sup> Common also in analyses of comic books is the method of simply applying a literary theory to the form to see what will result and to provide a handle on comic books, as in Palumbo's "The Marvel Comics Group's Spider-Man is an Existentialist Super-Hero; or 'Life Has No meaning without My Latest Marvels!'" (1983), in which he explores the Kafka-esque existence imposed on superheroes by that which differentiates them from the rest of society, their own superpowers.<sup>13</sup> In 1983's "More Than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Contemporary Comic Books," Max J. Skidmore and Joey Skidmore

present seemingly the perfect vehicle for acknowledging the form's audience and popular culture status, but they only enumerate various political themes and their presence in comic books. They do, however, provide a precedent for approaching comics with an agenda other than literary, nodding at why political themes might be included, who for or to what effect.<sup>14</sup> Common in all of these articles and others is an undercurrent of the authors establishing the research-worthiness of comic books. These works have provided the critical foundation necessary for the examination of Rangers comic books I intend.

Fan-oriented works, those with the same audience as the comic books themselves, have accounted for a majority of the written work about comic books, and most of these have been histories. Most of these histories are largely redundant, merely attempts at capitalizing on the comic book reader who did not buy the history that was published eight years before. However, each history has different strengths. I used three for this paper. The Penguin Book of Comics (1971) has a very good history of graphic narrative leading to comic books from ancient man on up, but oversimplifies its historical discussion once it reaches the modern comic book.<sup>15</sup> Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books (1986) is voluminous but a bit "gee whiz" for critical use, except for the chapter on pulp fiction's effect of comic books.<sup>16</sup> In this chapter, Goulart gives the most detailed description I have found about

how the pulp industry brought to the comic book industry much of its financial backing and ideological direction. The most recent is Mike Benton's The Comic Book in America; an Illustrated History (1989).<sup>17</sup> Benton's work chronicles the events in comic book history year by year, which does not allow Benton to elaborate on various ideas in depth, but it does allow his reader an effective overview, making it easier to chart the larger trends in the comic book field.

A few fan-oriented texts have been profoundly useful. The Comic Book Price Guide, published yearly by Robert M. Overstreet, provides necessary documentation information, as well as publishing articles detailing comic book history, many about Golden Age comic books, their creators, and trends.<sup>18</sup> Almost mandatory for any study of Golden Age comic books is The Photo-Journal Guide to Comic Books (1990), which has limited historical information but reproduces the covers of over 42,000, including most of the covers drawn during the Golden Age.<sup>19</sup>

Children made comic books a large part of their world, both because the publishers were often directed by the audience's letter writing and because of the form's vast popularity. And the comic book audience was one that had been taught to accept the comic book as didactic, because of the form's participation in the "war machine" as a vehicle of propaganda. Any analysis of comic books, whether it acknowledges it or not, works within these parameters. A

comic book does not exist merely as a text, but requires the interaction of an audience, on a social scale as well as with the actual reading of a comic book. Savage's socio-political study of Golden Age comic books is the first major work to acknowledge those parameters. My methodology for looking at the images of women in Rangers will be similar to that used by Savage. Savage's analysis went from culture to the comic book to conclusion. Mine will begin in the comic book, look from it to culture, and then to conclusions. The difference in emphasis is clear: the brunt of my analysis will be the text.

Exactly what an image of a woman is in a comic book is created primarily in two ways. The most noticeable means is visual--how is she drawn. In most cases she will be beautiful, but how? Is she alluring and sensual or pretty in an All-American way? What kinds of strengths are given to these two basic kinds of beauty that comic books use most competently and most often? Included in her appearance is her posture, her position in the panel as a part of the composition. Does she command the reader's eyes as well as the situation she is in? Actions are the next most obvious contributor to an analysis of an holistic image. What does she do? Does she require deference or give it? How does she verbally interact with men and other women? Does she require saving or do it? There are many such elements to explore. Is she independent? Does she have a sexual identity? If she does, then whether or not she is a/the protagonist delivers a

message about whether or not women should have a sexual identity. Once such a conclusion has been reached about what a comic book image is saying, then a conclusion may be offered about how this message could be interpreted by the comic book audience, one which was learning how to value women in a society which suddenly was itself unsure about women's role.

### Chapter 3

An understanding of comic book history, both social and critical, is necessary for an understanding of my topic, but also necessary is a general understanding of how images of women in comic books as a whole evolved during the 1940s. First, a survey of the images of women pervasive in popular art forms outside of comic books during the 1940s will help supply a context for study within the form. The information included here to create this context, especially that about women's changing social role, is admittedly general, but, for the purpose of this limited work, its scope is practical.

#### I

Before World War II, women participated in society generally as their mothers and grandmothers had, save that modern technology had increased leisure time.<sup>1</sup> A woman's identity was found in her home and family. Mass culture was willing to depict women as strong, but only in the context of home. In Gone with the Wind (1939), even Scarlett O'Hara, who undeniably took control of her life (until submitting to Rhett Butler), took control in order to maintain her home and family. The original incarnation of Stella Dallas, on the radio, promoted motherly love and self-sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> Her identity was only evident through her service to others,

service she performed primarily at home. One radio serial established woman's place even more specifically, "The kitchen is a corner of reality in a world gone berserk".<sup>3</sup> Implying that woman is only safe and in control in her haven, the home, further implies that outside of the home she is no longer safe or has any measure of control: outside the home is the man's world.

Conventional wisdom holds that the coming of the war changed woman's "imprisonment" in the home, but 25% of white women worked before the war (mass culture focused on white women in its creations, so I will in my discussion of it, although there were numerous parallels between the situations of women and minorities during the war), though almost exclusively in "women's jobs," primarily service and secretarial.<sup>4</sup> These women also tended to be from the lower-middle classes or below. But at the peak of the war, 40% of the work force was women.<sup>5</sup> Both the adult and adolescent elements of the comic book audience were affected by women's exodus to the workplace; one of the reasons the soldiers were fighting was to return and reestablish the traditional home--complete with a kitchen-bound wife and mother. The children were shuttled off to friends and grandmothers while mom worked. Both adolescents and soldiers were clearly aware of the differences created in mothers, wives, and girlfriends by the war; the changing role of women inevitably changed the roles of those around women.

Immediately after the beginning of the war, mass culture made the conflict the primary subject of its creations. The creators of mass culture, magazines, movies, and comic books, used the war to sell themselves as much as to sell patriotism. Mass media commonly addressed women directly, and instruction dominated the messages.<sup>6</sup> The messages commonly sent to women early in the war were mixed; women were asked to be productive workers, but also to maintain the glamour that mass culture suggested women aim for before the war. Norman Rockwell's Rosie the Riveter, which appeared on the Saturday Evening Post's cover, presented Rosie as muscular, with a rivet gun at the ready, and her foot resting on a copy of Mein Kampf. Yet the color in her cheeks and the compact half out of her pocket suggested that underneath her worker exterior, she was still a "feminine" woman. Even Stella Dallas got a defense job.<sup>7</sup>

Towards the middle of the war, woman began to be presented as more powerful, almost (but never quite) the equals in strength and social standing even of men (Figure 1). In Figure 1, the woman's pose is quite strong, and her weapon certainly as effective. But though the viewer (and the recipient of her blow) respects her power, it is still confined to the home; her tools are elements of home. She is connected to a situation and place so closely that she has brought some of it along with her. The image presents woman as powerful and necessary, but necessary only because of her

*With Everything—Including the Kitchen Sink!*



Figure 1

World War II poster

connection to the sink and the war bonds in her pocket. And the image places her; her necessity is specific, constrictive. Yet this image suggests a transition, and it became in the national interest to acknowledge it. In 1942, President Roosevelt called upon the nation to accept women's worth and contributions, "In some communities employers dislike to hire women. In others they are reluctant to hire Negroes. We can no longer afford to indulge in such prejudice".<sup>8</sup>

Once women firmly established themselves in their wartime positions, instead of simply working hard and having new status given to them, women began actively to claim new status. In 1944, the percentage of women working reached a

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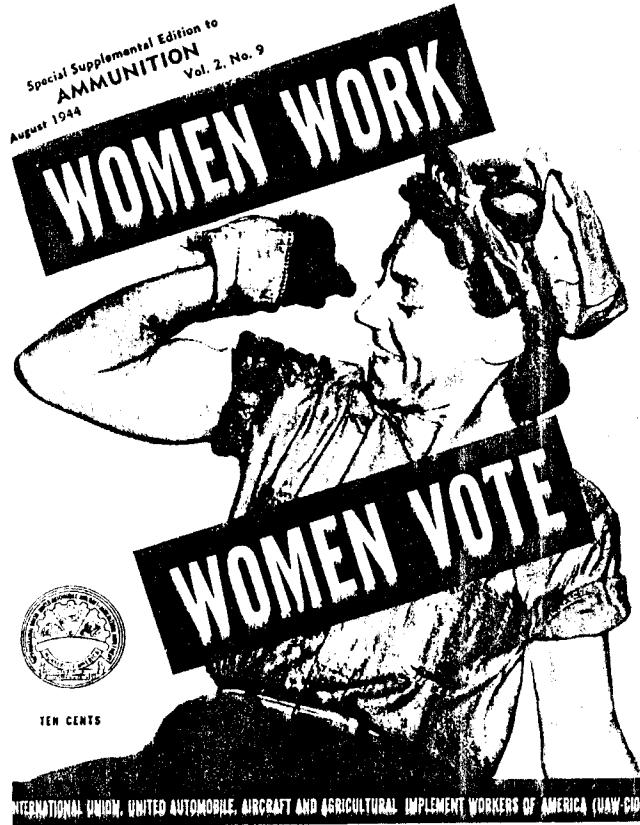


Figure 2

UAW-CIO poster (1944)

peak, and the number of women belonging to unions quadrupled during the war; women organized and began to flex their new muscles (Figure 2).<sup>9</sup> Working within unions gave women experience as activists and prepared them for the explosion of feminism two decades later. Most importantly such work suggested a shift in identity from one centered on the home to one aware of other issues, labor and sex related. The woman in Figure 2 has not one element of home or traditional



Figure 3



Figure 4

### World War II era advertisements

attractiveness attached to her. The powerfulness of women is emphasized, even framed by the title words, and she is proud of her strength. There is little hint here of the struggle so quickly to follow.

In the last year of the war, when America's eventual success became fairly assured, the impending conflict created by women's success in the workplace leapt to the forefront, and mass culture shifted its emphases to confront the issue by suggesting women's eventual return to domesticity.<sup>10</sup> Ads began to suggest that children were adversely affected by working mothers. From 1943 to 1945 woman went from a realistically drawn, devoted participant in the war effort to, in the same pose, an idealized domestic consumer (Figures 3, 4). When a 1945 survey revealed that 85% of women

wanted to continue in their present jobs after the war, it warranted headlines.<sup>11</sup> Though their desires would largely be thwarted, the statistic is important because it implies a real change in women's perspectives of themselves and their potential.

After the war, women's plans to continue working were successfully circumvented; through a combination of promotion and hiring practices and, of course, private choice, women went from their peak of 40% of the work force in 1944 to 18% in 1946 and 12% in 1948, though, due to economic prosperity, the number would rise slightly in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

In the late 1940s, the image of woman presented by mass culture returned almost entirely to the domestic, and, more significantly, to the powerless; woman became once again a prisoner in the home (Figure 5). An important twist on the domesticity of the late 1940s was its acknowledgement of women's sexuality, not merely the sexuality of the viewer looking at the image, but the perceivable sexuality of the figure in the image itself (Figures 6, 7). These images imply an active desire, some agenda on the part of the women in the ads. The obscuring of face and eyes denotes a mysteriousness on the part of the women, a new element to their presentation. The act of holding something back indicates the presence of an identity, one mixed here with sexuality. There had always been sexuality in the mass culture presentations of women, but women were presented as sexual objects, not as sexual



*"Let's both get down  
to earth, Mom!"*

**Johnson's Baby Oil**  
**Johnson's Baby Powder**

Figure 5



**freshy**  
*playclothes*

FOR SMART DATES, FOR HAPPY DATES OUTDOORS

For many, smart recreation under the sun, the beautifully  
tailored play suit by Freshy in Glen Echo, Md. is the  
thing. American Beauty, too, knows the Mid and when  
10 to 20 about \$10.00 at good stores everywhere. Or write the Tailor Co., 1210 Broadway, New York 18, N. Y.

Figure 6



Figure 7

### Post World War II advertisements

participants. The sexuality belonged to the viewer, not to the woman pictured. The controlling of sexuality functioned as another tool for controlling women. In the late forties and early fifties, this admission of personal and not imposed sexuality is interesting considering the other trends simultaneously developing, the social impulse to return women to their homes. The contrasting trends implies a confusion about the nature of women and their status in society, one that found its way into mass culture.

## II

Several female characters roamed the comic book world before the war, but Fiction House's Sheena was the only notable principal female character. The majority of the relatively few female characters played supporting roles, such as Superman's Lois Lane, self-driven but constantly in need of rescue. It was the war, however, and the extreme images that it brought to comic books that created an environment where women could assume real stature. DC Comics introduced Wonder Woman in 1941, and by 1942 she starred in two comic books and was featured in a third; she was not only the equal of her male superhero counterparts, but their superior physically and intellectually (Figure 8).

With the popularity of Wonder Woman established, comic book publishers created scores of women characters. But despite the precedent of Wonder Woman, most of these, even the female superheroes, were secondary characters, tagging along with the main attraction, the male hero. Bulletgirl accompanied Bulletman, and with Hawkman was Hawkgirl. The stories gave no reason to believe there was any significant difference in age between the male and female protagonists, yet the majority of these "superhero helpers" were diminutively named "--girl." These characters, along with the host of non-super female characters that attached themselves to the male heroes, signalled the beginning of the trend in

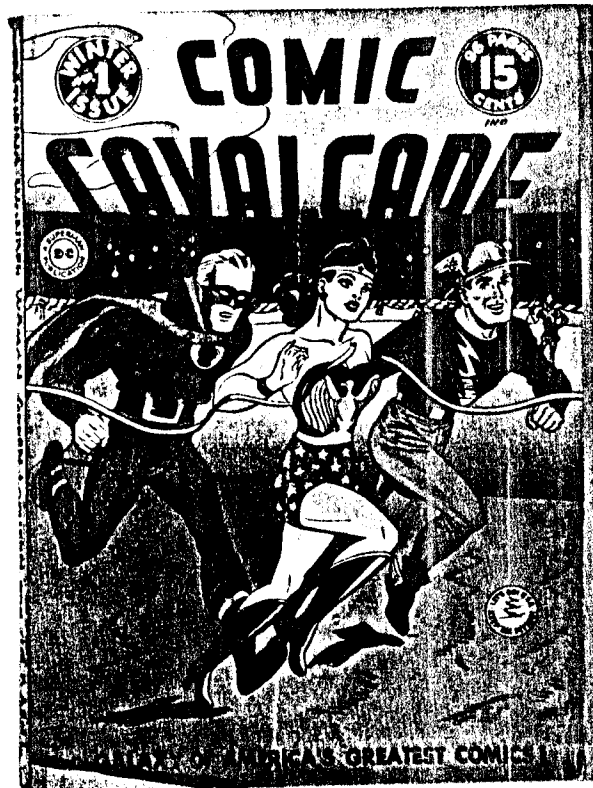


Figure 8

Comics Cavalcade (DC: Winter 1942)

"good girl" art. Comic book historian Art Amsie describes the most pervasive wartime presentation of women characters as serving

no useful function, except as decoration or sexy adjuncts to the hero. . . . In fact, they were more a hindrance than help. . . . Most often they were superfluous or even hazardous on dangerous missions. They made no technical contribution, took up valuable cargo space, distracted the hero, and were constantly in

need of protection or rescue. All this made for a very exciting, if quite implausible, story line.<sup>13</sup>

What these voluptuous, if unhelpful, characters did do was cater to the older, overseas audience. The "good girl" image was a targeted marketing device, usually adopted for stories of heroism read by soldiers, as well as the male adolescents at home.

Comic books targeted a different audience with working girl comic books. As women took over in the workplace, their competence was mirrored within the comic books intended for adolescent girls and young women. Many of the working girl characters from comic strips from decades earlier were resurrected to fulfill the growing appreciation for a more complete woman. Tillie the Toiler, Tessie the Typist, Dixie Dugan, and others presented women who were attractive, had careers, and, most importantly, were independent (Figure 9). The standard plot of one of these stories involved the protagonist being set with a problem, usually having to do with romance, career, or a threat to her independence, and she invariably solved the problem with aggressive use of plain common sense.<sup>14</sup> Though most of these characters were back-up features for more popular characters and contexts, they did mirror the change, however idealistically, that women were experiencing in reality.

After the war ended, the variety of images of women expanded. Facsimiles of Fiction House's Sheena abounded, all



Figure 9

Tillie the Toiler (King: 1948)

based on the same basic premise of protecting the animals, inhabitants and environment of their various exotic locations. While the female hero as sidekick faded after the war, largely because of growing disinterest in the kind of escapist, Axis-shattering story they functioned in, female heroes as principal characters became more common. Those wartime female heroes that survived were the ones who starred in their own back-up features during the war (Most comic books were anthologies, and back-up features were those which tended to be the last in the book--safer for the publisher should the feature prove unpopular). However, though this suggested at least a grudging acceptance of the idea of women as powerful individuals in comic books, the issue is confused because most of these female heroes are laden with every "good girl"



Figure 10

Fight Comics (Fiction House: 1945)

physical convention. Often the very situations that allowed the female hero to show her competence, like escaping capture, were used by the artists to highlight her generous physical attributes (Figure 10). How the "good girl" image affected images of women in comic books in general is a topic for further research, but, while many comic books presented strong women accomplishing difficult tasks, they also presented women as sexual objects to be looked at.

The three remaining popular genres for presenting women in comic books in the late 1940s were, interestingly, crime, horror, and romance comic books. All heartily adopted the



Figure 11

Crimes by Women (Fox: October 1948)

"good girl" conventions. The crime comic books used the freedom of the "good girl" image to present innumerable seedy locales; the "good girl" as villain found its apex (Figure 11). Most interesting about the crime comic books is that they most clearly established the practice of presenting criminal "good girls" as sultry, dark, and sensuous, while law-abiding women, even the beautiful ones, were often not portrayed as "good girls," or as having any real sexual power as the criminals did. Evidently the idea of a powerful woman with sexual identity had become a confused issue within mass culture.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many comic book publishers succumbed to the growing social discomfort with the strong, independent woman and public pressure about comic book



Figure 12

Real Love (Eclipse Books: 1988)

content. The romance comic books presented "good girls," usually innocently drawn, in search of what was considered the traditional American dream: husband, children, and home. Often these women did the pursuing in the relationship, but the stories continually undercut women's potential. "Was Love to Be My Sacrifice" presents a talented stage dancer who abandons her career for a husband (Figure 12).<sup>15</sup> Her sister, who drives her to maintain her stage career, is presented as thoroughly unsympathetic. The happy woman, according to "Sacrifice," is the woman who is a nobody. The horror comic books, responsible more than any other genre for the form's artistic demise at the hands of McCarthy's minions, had largely the same message when it presented women, save

that at the end of a horror comic book the woman inevitably died for the transgression of wanting a different life. The horror comic books became the specific target of criticism because they were, in the early 1950s, more gruesome, more popular, and, hence, more easily noticeable by adults.

It is important to note that, during this time when images of women became darker and female characters lost power they had only recently gained, Wonder Woman, Sheena, and others were still actively presenting themselves as powerful, independent role models. However, these kinds of female heroes became fewer and those that survived were less popular. Comic books seemed to be participating in the social impulse to re-establish women in traditional roles.

### III

The place of Fiction House in comic book history was as a mischief maker from the beginning. When Jerry Iger and Will Eisner created the first female hero, Sheena, for Fiction House in 1938, they chose a path different from the other publishers, and their shop would continue to produce features presenting images out of the mainstream both in comic books and in mass culture. The image of the all-American, heroic male was the only one most comic books promoted as fully and inherently worthwhile, but Fiction House published numerous stories featuring African natives, Chinese, Hindus, and Native

Americans as "heroes," though generally as either the stars of back-up features or as side-kicks to the headlining protagonists. Sheena was the last feature in the first issue of Jumbo Comics, but by the 13th issue she would grace the cover and be the main feature. Fiction House had such success with Jumbo and Sheena that they copied themselves with Jungle Comics, which introduced several strong jungle queens in the Sheena mold, as well as a few male versions.

With Jumbo doing well, Fiction House adapted three of its pulp titles, Planet Stories, Wings, and Fight Stories, into comic books in 1940: Planet Comics, Wings, and Fight Comics. Fight and Wings were war-oriented and did not immediately decorate its covers with the "good girl" image, but Planet depended on it from the first issue. With Rangers Of Freedom introduced the next year, Fiction House completed the core of its "good girl" comics that would last for the next decade. These comic books, except for Planet, began as almost entirely male in subject for the first dozen issues or so. Inevitably, consumer demand turned the comic books into "good girl" vehicles, and Fiction House obliged happily.

Just as Fiction House created the first female hero, Sheena, while the other publishers were thriving on male heroes, Fiction House presented images of women that contrasted with other comic books. Fiction House's creations were full of women who were leaders, who out-fought men, and who maintained their independence. Fiction House female

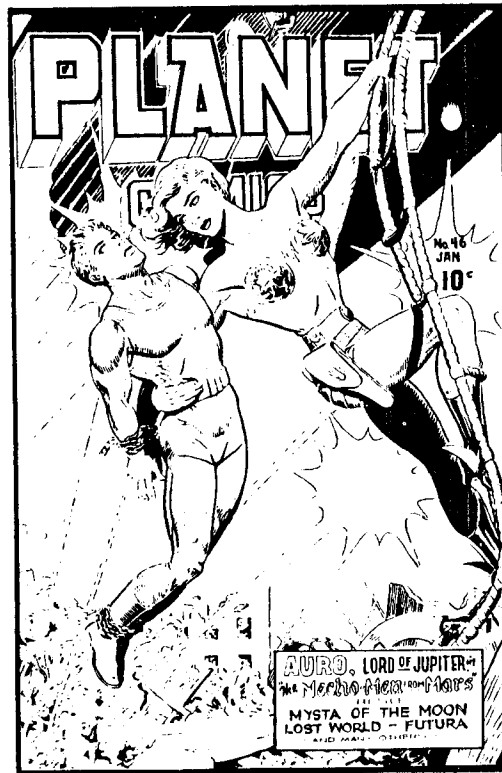


Figure 13

Planet Comics (Fiction House: January 1947)

heroes appropriated traditional male comic book postures, including the most common, saving the opposite sex from certain catastrophe. In Figure 13, a tall, buccaneer-like woman has swooped up an athletic-looking male who is the obvious physical inferior of the woman. Though she is beautiful and is wearing a bikini (albeit a metal one), she is the epitome of powerfulness; her chest is at least as broad as that of the handsome male she is saving. Though not all of Fiction House's female heroes are quite as strapping as this

one, the strong female character is far for common in Fiction House's comic books than those of any other publisher.

In the early 1950s, as the comics code (the self-imposed censorship adopted by the comic book publishers in order to avoid governmental censorship) began to threaten the industry, the image of women that had become Fiction House's forte was no longer the one that sold. In an effort to match society's fluid notions about women, Fiction House reintroduced male heroes in its main features. Nearly all of its strong female characters disappeared and were either replaced by males or by the newer vision of "womanhood," one ultimately subordinate, such as Rangers' 1952 creation, "G.I. Jane," who occasionally was competent, but only in between sessions of lipsticking and worrying over fingernails. Even Sheena, the second most popular female hero of the 1940s after Wonder Woman, vanished when Fiction House ceased publishing Jumbo Comics in 1953. Apparently, comic book readers had little use for the new Fiction House creations and it ceased publishing later in 1953.

#### IV

Rangers of Freedom Comics was one of Fiction House's "big six," its most popular comic books. Charting trends in Rangers is problematic because one cannot point to a specific issue as the beginning or ending of a trend. Rangers used an

anthology format, and its stories were written and illustrated by an entire shop of artists. While one continuing feature may still be perpetuating an old trend, another may be bringing in the new one. Because of this, defining, with any clarity, the beginnings and endings of trends is difficult.

However, there are four basic periods in Ranger's presentation of women. The first and last are shorter and more clearly delineated than the middle periods. The initial period lasted for only four issues. During this time, the stories use women mainly as either decoration or as plot devices. The "good girl" image had not yet developed into its most extreme and exploitive form, but the female physique served as a motivator for the "Rangers of Freedom" in the first issue; Miss America is captured and is paraded in torn clothes before the Rangers.<sup>16</sup> Women, in their few appearances, do little except present themselves as prizes to the Americans who saved them (Figure 14). The message: if you are thoroughly American and willing to fight and sacrifice yourself, then here's what you will receive.

The introduction of strong female characters in the fifth issue, mid 1942, ushered in the second period. However, even these strong female characters, who often participated in much of the action, frequently ended up captured or imperiled and in need of saving, including Peg from "Phantom Falcons," who was "a girl who wants a man's brand of glory" and "Glory Forbes" who "proves that wits and courage can defeat the most

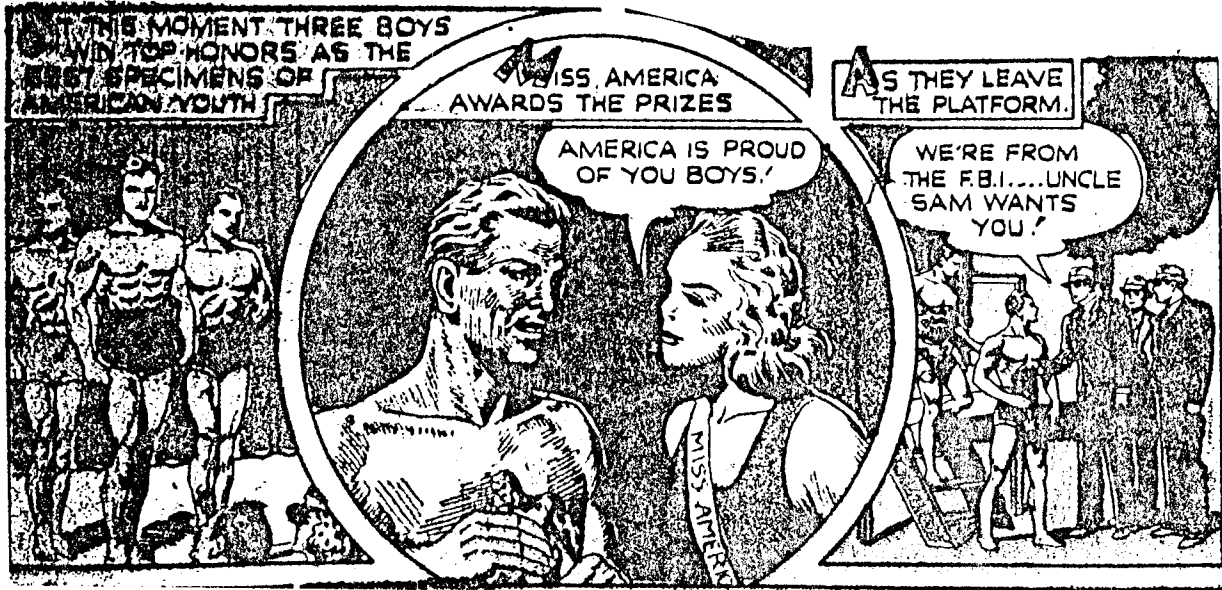


Figure 14

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1941)

ruthless enemy.<sup>17</sup> For the next nine issues of Rangers, two thirds of the stories that included any female character featured women being saved by men. Also interesting is that in the sixth issue Rangers commits itself to the good girl image (Figure 15). In this second period, Rangers nods at the strength of women, but undercuts it both narratively and visually.

The third period is the longest and the hardest to define because there is no single story that signals the change to an image of women powerful in action as well as in description. Male heroes still often save female characters, but these stories become fewer. With the introduction of "Firehair," the red-haired, white "daughter of the Sioux," in 1945, the



Figure 15

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1942)

twenty-first issue of Rangers, the third period seems firmly entrenched. The female hero thrives in this period: she is powerful physically; she is beautiful; she leads; she maintains an independent sexuality; and she solves problems in

the manner dictated by the situation, by force or through wit. However, until the thirty-ninth issue, while female heroes such as Firehair dominated the plots of Rangers, the comic book covers were dominated by images of "good girls" imperiled or being saved by men. Often, these images were unconnected to any of the features in the comic book, promising much more risque and gruesome adventures than the stories delivered. Only after the fortieth issue, when Firehair filled the covers, did the illustrations connect with the stories contained within.

The covers featured Firehair until the sixty-sixth issue; she was absent from the sixty-seventh in late 1952. A blonde, prissy W.A.C. named G.I. Jane replaced her and was the only significant female character in the comic. G.I. Jane was Firehair's antithesis in many ways; while Firehair led, Jane was fiercely subordinate. Though Firehair herself was deposed suddenly, this fourth period was foreshadowed by earlier changes. During the final ten issues of Rangers, stories which featured strong female characters began to be replaced by Korean war features such as "Commando Kill" and "Suicide Smith." Evidently the audience was not satisfied, because it was on the strength of these features that Rangers was cancelled after the sixty-ninth issue.

When comic book collectors discuss the Rangers "good girl," they are speaking of the version defined by the third period from around issue 15 in 1944 to issue 66. The bulk of

my research of the images of women presented in Rangers' will be from this period. But I will also explore the other periods in order to better understand what led to and succeeded some of the most powerful, and arguably the most complete, women in Golden Age comic books (1938-1954).

## Chapter 4

Because a complete analysis of the images of women presented in Rangers for its entire 11-year run would require more space than appropriate for a thesis, my analyses of the first, second, and fourth periods will be comparatively brief. The most significant reason for this is that the images of women presented during these periods are of the type expected of popular culture products, especially of the 1940s: the image of a weak woman unable to solve problems or protect herself. These periods deserve some attention both to establish how weak images of women were translated into the comic book form and to establish exactly how different the images of women during the third period are. I will concentrate the bulk of my study on the third period because the images there presented are anomalies both in comic books and in popular culture as a whole. It is with these incongruous images that the most can be gleaned from Rangers, about comic books as a whole, and about the society that produced them.

### I

On the cover of the first Rangers of Freedom comic book, we meet the three "boys" for whom the book is titled. The cover prominently frames the three busily thrashing a horde

of stereotyped Japanese soldiers while relegated to an unobtrusive corner one luckier Japanese soldier restrains a dark-haired woman. The splash-page (the first page or panel of a feature that presents what may or may not be one of the more exciting moments from the story, it acts as a "teaser" for the story) for the same story is similar save that now the woman is blonde and is being choked by a demonic looking figure of no ethnic variety. These two images set the tone for the first appearances of women in Rangers, of being in trouble and little else. Women appear in only 17 of the 35 stories that fill the first four issues of Rangers. In 10 of those, the women are plot devices: they are captured or imperiled and then they are saved by the male heroes. They merely serve to create the situation that highlights the worth of the male.

The evolution of Miss America/Gloria Travis/Ranger Girl in the main feature, "Rangers of Freedom," demonstrates most of the first periods images of women. The most prevalent image is as prize and motivator for the heroic male. Figure 1 is from a page of exposition, establishing how the "Rangers of Freedom" were formed. The three selected are teenagers, "the best specimens of America's youth," and are willing to join with the FBI to fight evil.<sup>1</sup> But to the soldier and the adolescent male audience, the figure could be interpreted as, "If you are fit, dedicated, and willing to sacrifice yourself to our governments purposes, you will have



Figure 1

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1941)

women offering themselves to you just as Miss America is offering herself to these boys." In the same issue, these young "Rangers" are captured by the villain they were sent to fight, Super-Brain.<sup>2</sup> While the Rangers pretend to have succumbed to brainwashing, a kidnapped Miss America is brought in to test them (Figure 2). With her expression and her clothes hanging off her, Miss America is a terrified sexual object. She is further relegated to the status of object by the fact that we do not even know her name; we know her only as "Miss America."

The woman-as-prize theme is probably the most pervasive in the first period. In "Jeep Milarkey," Jeep ogles female Lt. Tone, is rude to her, and even pushes her around, but



Figure 2

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1941)

when he saves her and she sees him overcome fifth columnists, she becomes immediately his.<sup>3</sup> The woman-as-prize theme ascribes great sexual power to the American male soldier--certainly a flattering description for the Rangers military audience. That flattery would operate to encourage the audience to accept this image of women as reality.

In the second issue of Rangers, the woman who was Miss America returns as aviatrix Lt. Gloria Travis of the women's

auxiliary air corps. She even shoots down an enemy plane. But she is again captured by Super-Brain and this time forced to wear a bikini.<sup>4</sup> During the first period of Rangers, whenever a woman shows power, her power is quickly undercut--usually by being captured and saved showing that despite occasional instances of strength she is still dependent on the male heroes. The narratives particularly target female intellectual strength, undercutting it by showing its limitations. In "Double Slango Kids," the single female member of the group suspects a crime has taken place, does the detective work to prove that it has, but is then captured and saved by the male members of the group.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that women might be adequate for certain tasks, but the really tough jobs require males.

The cover of the third issue displays the Rangers saving an imperiled woman about to be beheaded by a robed executioner, but there is no such woman or situation in that issue's "Rangers" story. Although the image is not used to forecast the content of the story, it serves another purpose. The cover paints a simple picture of the enemy as evil, the Rangers and by extension the American soldier as good, and beautiful women as weak, sexual objects in need of salvation by the American male. The strongest message is not that women are weak, but that American men are strong. The woman served only as an element to demonstrate that description. Gloria Travis, however, is in the third issue's story as the



Figure 3

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: February 1942)

newest member of the Rangers group: she is Ranger Girl. As Ranger Girl, she is the equal of the other Rangers (Figure 3).<sup>6</sup> The fourth issue of Rangers is Ranger Girl's last. After the Rangers are captured, she is at a test of strength, holding back the blade of a guillotine threatening the Rangers (Figure 4).<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, the Rangers arrive intact. No mention is made, though, of the miraculous transformation before the third issue that has taken place in Gloria/Ranger Girl. She is younger, now a girl, and comparatively shapeless. Not once is her torso prominently

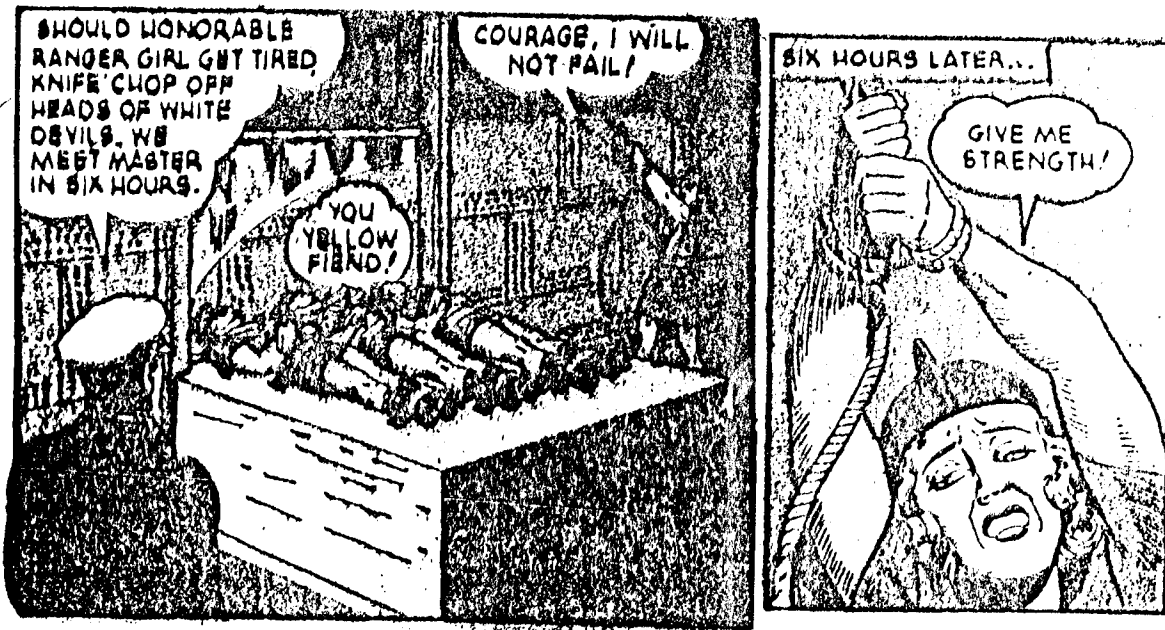


Figure 4

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1942)

displayed. Evidently Rangers was not yet prepared to allow a grown and attractive woman to be powerful, a combination that would threaten the sexual dominance given to men in comic books and other popular media.

Every image of women presented in the first four issues of Rangers at its core describes the weakness of women, particularly in comparison to men. The weakness implied in women is not just physical. Men are the moral superiors as well. In "Don Stuart of the Far East Rangers," the daughter of a Nazi agent is attracted to the hero, and tries to help him and only one of his two Chinese companions escape (Figure 5).<sup>8</sup> His offense at the prospect of leaving one of his companions demonstrates that he appreciates the bonds of



Figure 5

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1941)

friendship and loyalty, that he sees across the boundaries of race. She, however, has just betrayed her father to help the hero. Her dismissal of the importance of Don's two friends equally demonstrates her comparative moral infancy. In the first period, a woman is weak or her strength is undercut either by her appearance or by the male heroes around her.

## II

The fifth issue seems an appropriate place to designate as the beginning of the second period, in which women are given the pretense of strength but not the actuality, because in the fifth issue we meet Glory Forbes and Peg Darnell. Both are described as powerful, but neither fulfill that promise. On the splash page of the first "Phantom Falcons" story, Peg is shown holding a machine gun and the team's mascot falcon (Figure 6). She assumes a strong pose, but she is also wearing high heels, more appropriate attire for a salesgirl than for an air combat fighter. Because of her pose and because she is the only team member featured on the splash page, we would assume that she plays a prominent role in the story. However, in their first dogfight, she is wounded and saved by a man, who completes the task that she could not.<sup>9</sup> In the tenth issue "Phantom Falcons" story, Peg has done the cooking and whines because nobody

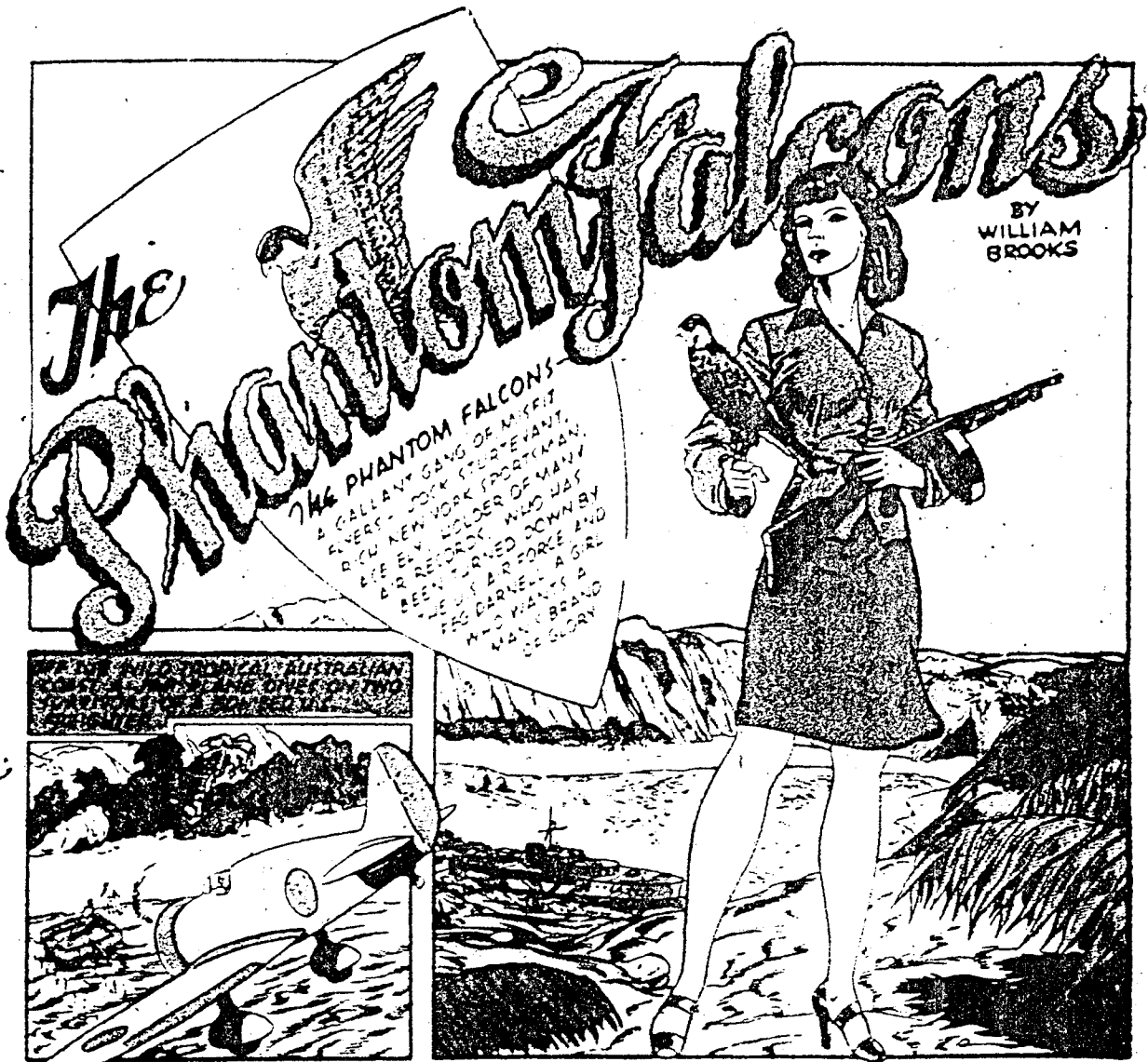


Figure 6

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: June 1942)

appreciates her (Figure 7).<sup>10</sup> Even a "strong woman must bow to her heritage in the kitchen.

Similarly, "Glory Forbes, Vigilante" is described as equal to any task, but the first noticeable image we see of her is the typical screaming victim pose familiar from any



Figure 7



Figure 8

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1943, June 1942)

number of horror movies (Figure 8). The story's villain, Yaki-Su, who continues to terrorize Glory for several issues, captures Glory and drugs her, making her his slave, but she is saved by her "Sidekick," Randy, who also has been captured but manages to free himself.<sup>11</sup> As is common with the introduction of a new feature, the first two pages are full of exposition about the "hero," and we learn quite a bit about Glory, but we learn nothing about Randy. Glory is clearly the central figure, but, according to the story, even peripheral male is stronger than a central female, even if she is a vigilante and ostensibly the "hero."

While the strength of women became increasingly ambiguous during this second period, the sexual power of the



Figure 9

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1942)

American male became more pronounced as did the susceptibility of women to him. In four consecutive "Rangers" stories, Capt. Morgan, now the leader of the group, has strong women wilting in his arms (Figure 9).<sup>12</sup> In two of these cases, the strong woman is a foreign spy. The sexual power of Capt. Morgan, and, by extension, the male soldier, is so strong that women abandon their beliefs and even their lives for him. Rangers, in this period, is willing to give women positions of strength, but only if it remains clear that their role is secondary to that of the American male.

Further undercutting the pretense of strength women are allowed in the second period is their visual presence and



Figure 10



Figure 11

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1942, August 1942)

graphic employment. Before the sixth issue, only selected elements of "good girl" imagery had been used: such as the occasional torn or over-emphasized breasts, but suddenly the image became pervasive. The image relegates the female character to the status of object not only sexually but graphically as well. Women are interchangeable, visually: it makes little difference which one is used in which story because, during the second period, all the illustrations of women combine to form an aggregate, generic image (Figures 10, 11). In the sixth and seventh issue Rangers stories, the



Figure 12

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1942)

same drawing is used to represent two distinct female characters--one is a spy and the other is not; one helps the Rangers accomplish their task and the other does not. Visually, however, the differences do not matter because it is the same woman. This suggests that using women visually is more important for the story than using them as individuals and participants in the narrative.

At least once an issue, Rangers presented women in some slight variation of "the pose," standing in profile with one leg slightly raised (Figure 12). Her form is important

enough to spread across panel lines. This image is significant not only because it reinforces the woman-as-interchangeable theme, but because only on a few occasions is the male form used graphically in this manner, crossing over panel lines and connecting different illustrations.

Graphically, her form is a design device, a tool, something to be used. The effect is concentrated because, in the illustration, she is posing prettily while the group is being chased by the enemy. Her body is her only contribution to the action. In the narrative, she is to be seen and not heard, though the male child in the same illustration is both.

### III

Between issues 10-20 in Rangers, images of women changed gradually, one feature at a time and some more quickly than others. As a result, it is hard to define the third period's beginning. Clearly, though, with the introduction of "Firehair" in issue 21, a new image of woman as strong, as leaders, and as independent became prominent. Though the aggregate image created in the third period is a powerful one, the elements are mixed and the final image is complicated. To best analyze such an involved image, I will first approach it simply, presenting an entire "Firehair" story, both to provide my audience with a clearer reference



Figure 13

Figures 13-22 from Rangers (Fiction House: October 1946)

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 14

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 15

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 16

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 17

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 18

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 19

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 20

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 21

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 22

and to establish the image as strong, leaving its permutations for subsequent analysis.<sup>13</sup> Firehair seems the likeliest character to study first and most closely because at her introduction hers became the featured story of every issue. After issue 39, she graced the covers. She presents the most consistent and most thoroughly constructed image of women in the period.

Two descriptions present themselves immediately and simultaneously to the reader of any "Firehair" story. She is both beautiful and powerful. In Figure 13, Firehair rides the cow catcher of a speeding train, two six-guns smoking, yet her clothes expose her legs, her midriff, and much of her breasts. Firehair is a "good girl." Yet none of this seems to detract from her power. If anything, her exposed flesh increases her power. She seems a force of nature, a fury meting out needed justice. Often, as in the middle of Figure 17, her form is featured. As in the earlier presentations of the female form, the illustration is specific. Her dress is lifted to clearly reveal more than just her legs. Combined with the placement of the rope and the shadowed framing of her breasts, there is a definite leering quality to the drawing. Whenever such a panel is dedicated to highlighting her form, however, she is active. Unlike the exploitation of the female form in the earlier periods, when the woman frequently poses as those around her fight for their lives,

Firehair furthers the narrative, works toward the conflict's resolution even as she presents herself to be looked at.

Firehair mixes demonstrations of power through her episodes of exhibitionism. The narrative starts with the bottom two panels in Figure 13, and here we find Firehair riding a powerful horse without the benefit of saddle or bridle. She clings to it by holding onto its mane with her hands and by clasping her legs around its side. She commands it and it obeys. She has power over animals. In Figure 14, she investigates a criminal charge against a Native American, a protective action, but knows when the man lies to her. She demonstrates the power of discernment. In the ensuing fight (Figure 15), she fares well but is overcome, but during the fight she yells at the leader, "There--there, I'm going to kill you--**kill you!**" This is hardly the threat of a woman who is or considers herself weak. As she climbs down a rope (Figure 17), she exhibits physical power, the preeminent power in a comic book. Once she discovers the source of the wrongdoing, she tells Tehama, the chief of the village in which she lives, that "There is no time to argue--you must do as I say." And he does. She is a leader; she has power over others, including men who are themselves leaders. Moreover, she is not afraid to meddle in "white man's business." Her concern is with larger issues. Probably the most impressive display of her power, if not the most obvious, is her solution to the conflict. When she hijacks the train before

the robbers do in order to lay in wait for them, she thinks two steps ahead and makes a tough decision, to appear to be a criminal in order to stop the real criminals. She takes responsibility for the action. When the criminals do arrive, it is her plan which, led by her, saves the train. All this breaks with conventional wisdom about the ability of women to think critically, to make tough decisions, to react in an emergency, or to lead.

The images presented in Rangers in the first two periods created a rift between power and beauty by both visually and narratively separating beauty from the completion of any action and by making "good girls" passive or worse. When woman's form is made prominent in "Firehair," it is done when Firehair is active. By being beautiful while resolving a conflict, she joins "good girl" beauty and power, which, by extension, means idealized womanhood and power. During the third period, power is a new trait in the make-up of the ideal woman.

In this Firehair story, as in most others, the villains are white men after money. Consistently in Rangers and specifically in "Firehair," the pursuit of money and money itself are treated as corrupt and corrupting. In this "Firehair" story, money causes a Native American to lie and be killed. When the leader of the gang describes his plan to rob the train, the combination of his grimace and the lighting from below make his excitement for money more than

sinister (Figure 17). And while the men in "Firehair" seek money, Firehair nonchalantly gives it away (Figure 22). She tells the engineer to "divide it among the train crew--you all deserve it for being scared out of your wits--so long!", certainly a much more socialist sentiment than that espoused by the villain. Firehair is the "hero," heroes are to be emulated, and she dismisses money as unimportant. During the late 1940s, money and capitalistic progress were important to the nation, but throughout her career Firehair preached an anti-money sermon.

Firehair's dislike for money is well-grounded, for it was greedy white men who, disguised as Indians, attacked her wagon train, killed her father, and made her an amnesiac ward of the Sioux.<sup>14</sup> When, several issues later, she recovers her memory, she is told that she must choose between her considerable inheritance or life with the Sioux. She decides to stay with the tribe.<sup>15</sup> Yet she keeps control of her inheritance, sets up a bank, and loans money to people without expecting them to ever pay it back. "I like Mr. Cole's wife--that's enough security for me . . . give him the loan, I say!"<sup>16</sup> On another occasion, Firehair overpays for a house and justifies it by saying "Mrs. Thompson needs the money."<sup>17</sup> When her accountant complains, "Sentiment and bizness don't mix." She counters, "I know, I know, but I'm going to buy it." For her, sentiment and business clearly do mix. The separation of the two is an archetype created by a

male business establishment, one that justifies harsh decisions by describing them as "just business." Though she clearly dismisses the importance of money, she has it and understands its importance in people's lives, and her control over money gives her yet another element of power. When she and some Native American boys stumble upon a large cache of gold amidst human skeletons, she gives the boys a lesson about the nature of money: "It's gold. Always it makes trouble. Those men killed each other for it. Don't touch it--come, we must go!"<sup>18</sup> Money itself is a dangerous force, one that only Firehair can readily control. In "Firehair" stories it is the concern with getting money that inevitably brings ruin, usually to males. When she does give away money, it is to or because of women.

In the same story, the boys disobey and several nearly die, save for the intervention of Firehair. Firehair is the guardian of the tribe from the evils of money. By controlling money, Firehair appropriates the traditionally male possession and control of money and the power that goes with it. She protects both in her willing dispensation of money to those who need it, usually white, and in her attempts to cloister her inexperienced tribe away from it. Whether or not protectiveness is more or less a trait of women than men, the protective impulse is conventionally attributed to women, but in "Firehair," this impulse is given force. A conventional idea about women, also conventionally

weak, is transformed from another element in their weakness to an element of strength.

Applying the critical concerns of today to the popular culture of the past is a trap difficult to avoid. For many years, feminist ideology strove to distance women from weaknesses conventionally ascribed to them by suggesting women could demonstrate "male" qualities as well or better than could men. Over the past decade, however, feminist criticism has shifted to an emphasis on the inherent power and competence of many "women's" traits before conventionally assumed to suggest neither. This shift mirrors some elements of the creation of strength found in "Firehair." She takes elements of womanhood and finds power in them. The messages are mixed, of course. She does lead, take control, a typically "male" activity, but only when the situation calls for it. She does not seek to be the chief of the tribe; she is willing to be a member of the tribal community. A sense of interconnectedness is, according to Carol Gilligan, the culmination of women's moral growth, a participation in a community.<sup>19</sup> When Firehair and her companion, Little Ax, are attacked by a bear, her action initiates its defeat (Figure 23). Yet when Little Ax gives her the credit, she reminds him it was a group effort.<sup>20</sup> The purpose for her world is not an ascension in the hierarchy described as the male paradigm by the modern feminists and certainly

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 23

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1945)

illustrated by the male comic book heroes of the time, Superman and all his clones. Hers is a world interdependent.

Rangers' female characters often clearly declared their own strength and simultaneously delivered thinly disguised feminist messages of the most basic kind. Firehair reverses

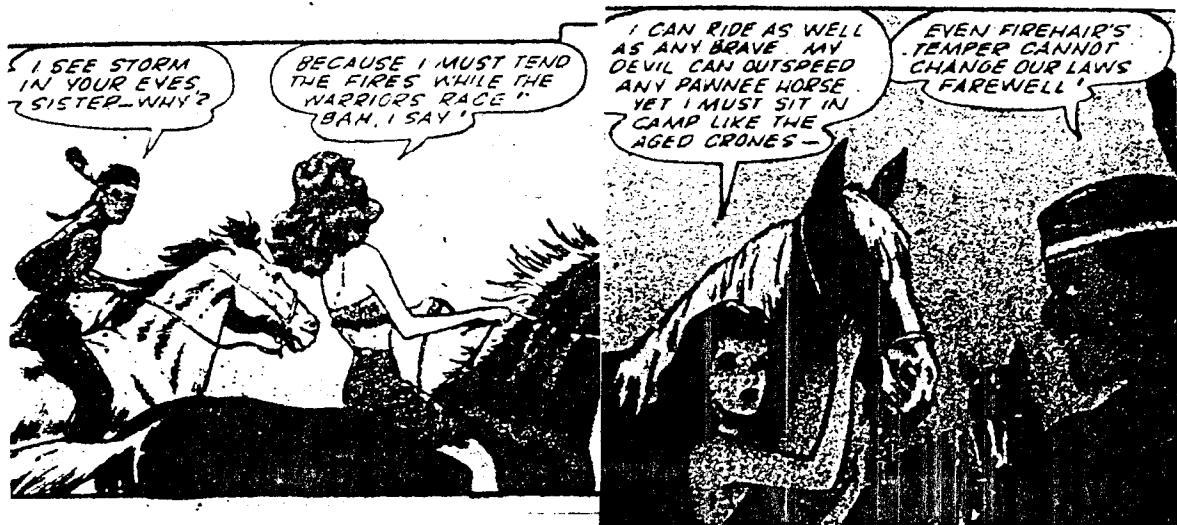


Figure 24

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1945)

some roles. While in the first two periods, women spies abandoned their beliefs to serve the male hero, in issue 42, Firehair save the life of a criminal involved in a plot to discredit and destroy her tribe.<sup>21</sup> After her see that she is morally superior to those he had conspired with, judging people individually instead of by race, he abandons the plot, helps Firehair thwart it, and loses his life. In another story, when her tribe plans a horse race with their traditional rivals, the Pawnees, Firehair wants to participate but is denied because she is female (Figure 24).<sup>22</sup> Firehair balks at being relegated to the socialization feminine role, believing her abilities should



Figure 25

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1942)

be allowed to take her as far as possible. Little Ax responds, "Even Firehair's temper cannot change our laws--farewell!" Yet her temper does change at least the application of the laws, for in later stories, such as the one printed here in its entirety, she commands even the chief. When she discovers and foils the plot behind the horse race, she over comes one of the villains, who is startled that his combatant a "A squaw--AA--ACH!"<sup>23</sup> Firehair responds, "A squaw, horse thief, but a better man than you!" (Figure 25). This statement implies a few important concepts. First, being a "man" is not a function of gender but of honor; second, it is not being a squaw,

female, that Firehair minds, for she acknowledges her status. What she dislikes is her exclusion from opportunities she proves she can handle. Finally, as a woman, she knows that she demonstrates more honor than does the criminal man.

Rangers presented its most interesting and complicated set of mixed messages about the role of women with "Kazanda," its version of the jungle woman popularized by Fiction House's own Sheena. "Kazanda," however, seems to be a combination of Sheena's jungle conventions and Wonder Woman's stories saturated with didactic infusions of myth. On the scroll of exposition on the story's splash panel we find the incongruous description of the female hero: "a golden vision of beauty. A strange creature called **Kazanda** . . . armed with powers beyond the knowledge of mortal man" (Figure 26).<sup>24</sup> She is described as a "creature," a common diminutive name used to dehumanize women, an appellation almost never applied to adult males. Yet she also possesses powers beyond those possessed by "man;" though, of course, the term is used generically, the idea of Kazanda's power being greater than "man's" is still conveyed.

Her use of one of these powers, mental telepathy, is directed only to the female member of the three "otherworlders," Aileen, and only she receives it. Kazanda implies that all women have these powers in some degree when she explains, "The girl--she did hear me! But her powers are not as strong as mine" (Figure 27). This implication is



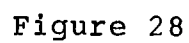
Figure 26

Figures 26-34 from Rangers (Fiction House: June 1945)

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 27



## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 29



Figure 30

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 31

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 32

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 33

## RANGERS COMICS



Figure 34

cemented in similar situations in five succeeding stories. According to this, all women have special powers to one degree or another that men do not have. Moreover, these powers are connecting powers, powers that place the user in a community only with other users, women, and would create the sisterhood of women that feminist ideology proposes.

While Kazanda, as an image of women, is the center of the story and the protagonist, Ailen is merely a plot device, a character to be captured, imperiled and saved. Sylf has taken her to his castle. "Sylf" is an obvious homonym for "sylph," meaning a delicate woman, of which he is not an example. He does, however, collect sylphs. When Kazanda uses her powers to create an "air picture," we see that Sylf has captured Aileen and is preparing to turn her into a statue, a process we get to watch with a different victim. "It is the woman's destiny. She is to take her place in the grotto of eternal silence" (Figure 32). Sylf has a collection of the chauvinist's "perfect" wives. They are beautiful, are at his command, are sexual objects, and are, above all, silent.

The story presents Sylf as the villain and his misogynist process of turning women into statues as evil. Kazanda is strong, and she leads the men with her gender-based powers. When one of the male characters asks if she "dare" help them rescue Aileen, she responds, "Dare? Kazanda fears nothing!" Yet Kazanda constantly poses needlessly

while she explains things to the male characters, often in some variation of "the pose" found in the earlier periods, undercutting her power by becoming an object herself. As the serial-like story progresses through the issues, we discover that Kazanda is actually in love with Sylf. When she saves Aileen, she imperils Sylf, who must either provide a sacrifice or be one, and then Kazanda must save him. The story becomes increasingly convoluted and all the issues increasingly confused. However, the grotesque image of women being turned into statues and enshrined as objects in a cave is horrific enough to create an anti-misogynist message even amidst mixed symbols. The broad view of the plot finds Sylf eventually being cast down from his prominent position because of his perversity. Misogyny, like crime, does not pay.

The strong images of women contained in Rangers were compromised for the third period's first 24 issues by the comic book covers. Each of these featured a "good girl" in some posture which emphasized her physical features. Only five of these were not imperiled and most were in the process of being saved by a man. The "good girls" were sexual objects who were pursued but passively awaited their fate. The cover of issue 26 provides a good example (Figure 35). Here we find a "good girl" parachuting inexplicably, for the image finds no fruition in the comic book's content. There is not story that involves a parachuting woman. She serves

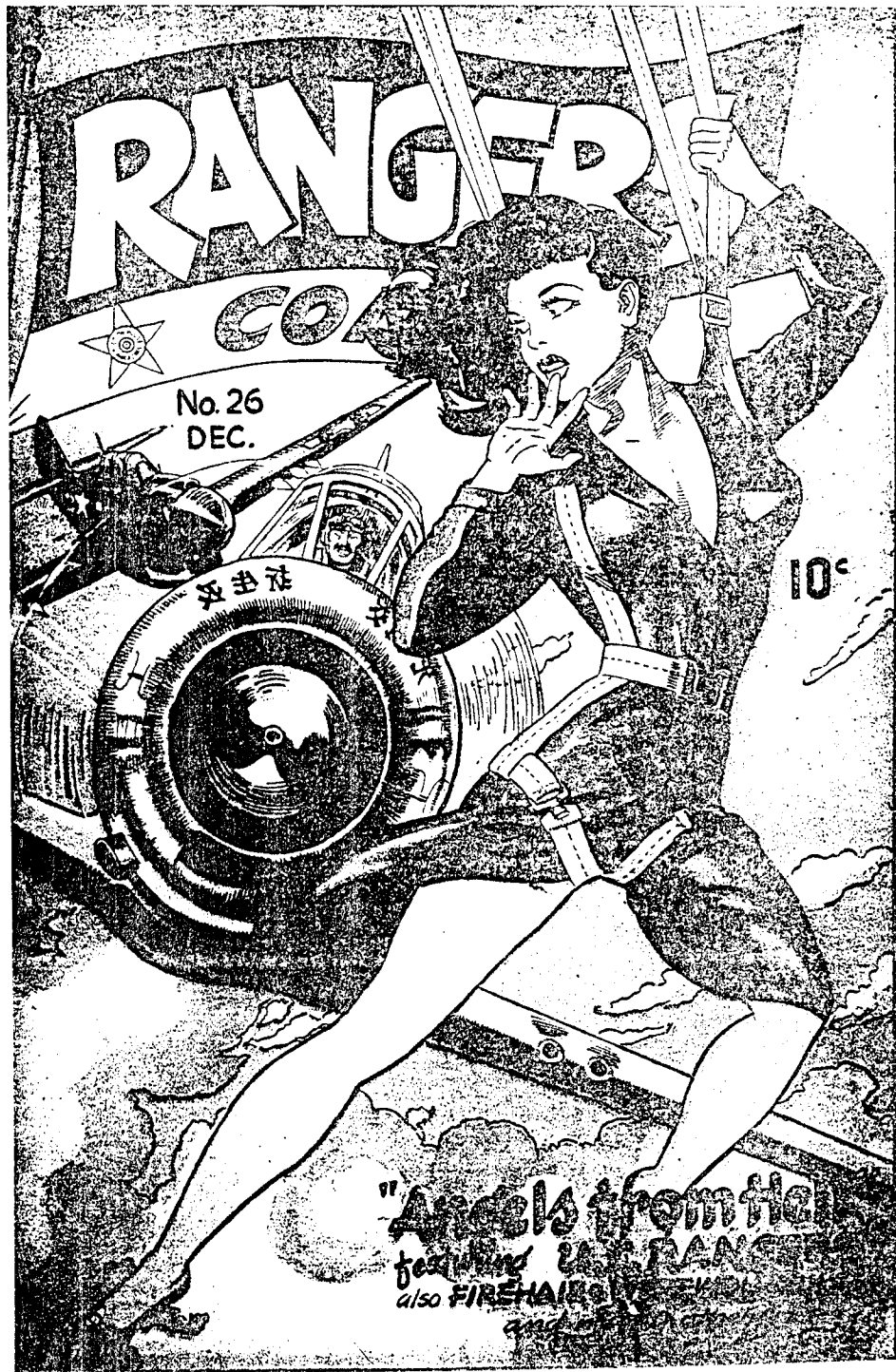


Figure 35

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: December 1945)

only as a sexual object. Her dress is open to below her breasts, which are highlighted. The parachute straps emphasize her narrow waist. Most notable is the placement of the parachute straps around her legs, hiking up her dress and forming a virtual "X marks the spot" visual signal. She is clearly powerless. A male character in the same situation would be firing a tommy gun and taking out the enemy plane on his own. But because of the defensive position of her arm and the leering, grinning enemy pilot, she is clearly in need of saving. An American plane trails close behind the Japanese pilot, seemingly in an effort to save the "good girl." But she simply waits and poses, a passive, sexual creation.

The female characters inside the comic book are also sexually drawn, but they are not passive. Two "Firehair" stories tell virtually identical tales in which an immature Native American male declares his desire for her and offers to pay, is rebuffed, agrees to fight her for her hand, loses, conspires with a white criminal, takes Firehair by force, and then is again defeated by her. The first of these appeared in Rangers issue 30, when the comic book still appeared monthly and the "Firehair" feature was less than a year old. The story opens with Firehair secretly making a buffalo robe for Chief Tehama: she does not explicitly state her interest in Tehama, but she is smiling and conspiratorial as she lets three children in on her secret. When the paramour, the

sexually named Red Lance, destroys the robe in his declaration, Firehair beats him with a staff.<sup>25</sup> The white criminal that Red Lance joins to kidnap Firehair is "Squawman," who has three wives. As with Sylf, possessing more than one wife is connected with criminality and flawed power. While escaping, Firehair slays Red Lance. When, in the last panel of the story, Tehama remarks, "So Firehair, those who come to woo find much trouble!", Firehair responds coyly, "Yes, Tehama, when the time comes I'll pick my own husband." Firehair is interested in men, does envision a time when she will be married, but, most importantly, maintains control over when she will make that decision and which man she will make it for.

The second version of this story appears six years later in issue 65, the last "Firehair" story before it is replaced by the comparatively bland "G.I.Jane." All the same elements appear, but Firehair has assumed a different attitude about marriage. When she duels Beaver Tail, also sexually named, she does as the accepted "strongest warrior of the maiden's tribe."<sup>26</sup> As she defeats him she asks, "Shall I break you lance across your back, boy, to prove that I am no bride for you." She humiliates him physically and sexually. At his point, she could merely be saying that he is not the man she wants. But after the carnage is over, she explains that the fault in the incident lies with "those who cannot see what a worthless wife I would be!" She would not make a good wife

because she does not choose to be one. The "woosers" come to make her a traditional wife, powerless and controlled, but she will not accept that role.

The imperiled "good girl" cover describes woman as sexual but passive. When the female characters of the first two periods are allowed any sexual identity, it is weak and the woman will succumb to the first American male she comes across. In these two "Firehair" stories, however, she establishes her sexual identity actively. First she establishes herself as the mistress of her own life. She has interests and she controls them. The second story presents a sexual identity more complex. She describes herself as a "maiden" twice, and is so described thrice by others. The story goes out of its way to make that point. It would seem that such status would deny an active and powerful sexual identity. But by describing herself so she demonstrates that she is quite aware of her status, and by choosing that life for herself, she has actively chosen a sexual identity that does not include sex. A man would add nothing to her life: she is complete without one.

There are a few minor images in the third period that deserve attention but defy elegant transition. So I will simply present them without the attempt.

Early in the third period, when the war still commanded some of the attention in Rangers, the "Ranger" features, "Commando Ranger" and "U.S. Rangers," seldom allowed the male heroes to complete their tasks without the help of a "good girl" spy or resistance leader. These stories quickly became back-up features with the onset of the third period and soon vanished completely. But these strong female participants in the war effort, during the few issues in which they thrived, signalled the firming of the third period's images.

Most often, these resistance fighters were the local contact of Commando Ranger or Capt. Morgan, the leader of the U.S. Rangers. When the inevitable action started, these characters participated. The most interesting image is Sandra, "descended from Alexander the Great" (Figure 36).<sup>27</sup>

When her resistance role is discovered, she wields a battle axe, though she does take a moment beforehand to pose. She leads the charge against a Nazi stronghold and is shown beheading a soldier with her weapon. These rebel leaders and spies participated on every level in the stories, often saving the male heroes in the process.

"Glory Forbes, Vigilante" was a back-up feature for over 40 issues, but for the first two-thirds of that time, the images presented by Glory Forbes are inconsistent. This is probably due to the fact that with back-up features, there



Figure 36

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1944)

was much less uniformity with who did the scripting and the artwork. The archetypal "Glory Forbes" story finds her stumbling onto a crime, investigating it, being captured by the villains, freeing herself, and, finally, capturing the villains. The title misleads because Glory's purposes are almost never vigilante-oriented. She merely happens across a situation and seeks to fix it.

Most notable about Glory Forbes as a character is that she is the only character in the entire run of Rangers consistently to use humor. The feature is often intended to be funny, depending on who was writing the particular stories, but Glory often told jokes. Robin Lakoff, in her (in)famous linguistic study states that women do not tell or commonly understand jokes, that women do not have what men consider to be a sense of humor.<sup>28</sup> Succeeding work has since refuted her analysis of gender differences in language, but Lakoff's study depends heavily on conventional ideas about how women use language, and popular culture most often reflects conventional beliefs. Glory Forbes, alone in Rangers, broke with this convention, sometimes to even greater effect by making sexism the butt of her jokes. When a pair of her slower male friends offer, "We'll save ya, lady!", Glory responds, "Mind siting out just one more wallop, fellas? There! I'm ready to be rescued now!" Glory used humor as another aspect of her strength, to ridicule that which attempted to belittle her competence.

"Werewolf Hunter" is probably the most disturbing collection of images in Rangers. The hero is a male professor of the occult who fights its evil incarnations. These hobgoblins of every sort usually decide that some "good girl" is the most appropriate recipient of their attentions.



Figure 37

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: August 1945)

Sometimes the "good girl" succumbs, and sometimes not (Figure 37). But the important element is that these unfortunates are given little characterization. They are simply imperiled and either successfully protected or not by Professor Broussard, the werewolf hunter. This feature does not present parables about the eventual downfall of those who meddled with nature. It is merely a series of stories presenting "good girls" as victims.

This simple image of the "good girl" as victim ran simultaneously with "Firehair," "Glory Forbes, Vigilante," and all the rebel-leader images. The images presented in "Werewolf Hunter" do not overshadow the strong images elsewhere in Rangers, in fact, the opposite is true. The

feature usually occupied its space near the end of the book. But because these weak images are so consistent, they do undercut the strong images presented throughout the rest of the comic books of the period.

The last image of women during the third period that deserves attention is novel because it is not visual. Every issue of Rangers included one prose story. Early on, these stories focused on the heroic activities of the common soldier, but as the war faded from the book, these stories either featured characters from the illustrated stories or wandered to horror, space opera, or fantasy. Most important for the third period, though, is the absence of women from these stories. In the entire run of Rangers, only one of these stories featured a woman. In it, Glory Forbes, a strong character in her illustrated story in the same issue, makes a fool out of herself looking for a date.<sup>29</sup> Women play secondary roles in some of these prose stories, but are usually relegated to such roles as "my cute little nurse, Helen."<sup>30</sup>

Such diminutive descriptions undercut the stronger images that fill most of the third period's stories, but my intuition is that the effect is minimal. First, the stories are often buried near the end, between ads, or even split up, forcing the reader to jump around the comic book looking for

the rest. Also, as readers join in the discourse community that consumes comic books, they adopt "reading" strategies different from those required for reading prose, and my suspicion is that these stories largely served as fillers and were not as well-read as the illustrated stories.

#### IV

The last period of Rangers consists of the last three issues, and in the 15 stories that comprise these issues, most with such macho titles as "Suicide Smith," "Robert the Bruce," and "Famous Fighters," only six included any women. Two of these were villains, one appeared only on a single page, and the other three were "G.I. Jane." "G.I. Jane" was not, as was "Firehair," the lead feature. It appeared as the last story in the comic book. While Firehair often led her tribe into battle, Jane Walters was a private in the Women's Army Corps. Firehair jumped from horses and off of cliffs to capture villains, but the first image presented of Jane was of her screaming and in danger (Figure 38).<sup>31</sup> This is a harsh transition from Firehair. But this simple and harsh transition epitomizes what happened to images of women in the short, fourth period.

Jane's lashes are long and her lips are red. While Firehair's "good girl" beauty, even at its most voluptuous,

# G.I. JANE in WILDFIRE



G.I. JANE WATERS, STATIONED AT A SECRET ARMY EXPERIMENTAL STATION IN THE DEPTHS OF A WESTERN FOREST, DRIVES TOWARDS THE STATION WITH A CARGO OF CRATED INSTRUMENTS...



Figure 38

Figures 38-42 from Rangers (Fiction House: Winter 1952)



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41



Figure 42

only increased her aura of power, the prettiness of Jane has no such aura. She is merely sexually attractive. Even when she is running off to put out a fire, she is a pretty object, drawn to highlight her curves. Her attractiveness is a major issue with her as well (Figure 39). When she is in a wreck, her first concern is health and her second is her appearance. We learn soon that she was transporting "secret gear" in her truck, but her looks were more important to her. After she helped the villagers escape the fire, one woman asks to be taken somewhere "where we can wash up? All of us look so terrible" (Figure 40). When Jane responds, "That's what I'm thinking about too! Us women!", it is clear that she uses the term "women" generically, implying that, even in an emergency, a woman's looks are her first priority. This image meshes with the stereotypical description of women as vain.

Stereotypes dominate the story: when Jane is asked to relocate the "secret gear," she takes on the "ditzy blonde" role and cannot make up her mind about where she left the wrecked truck (Figure 41). She is ordered about throughout the story. When she informs her superior about the gear, he interrupts her in mid-sentence, a key element in establishing dominance in conversation.<sup>32</sup> She calls the men around her "sir" while she is called "Jane" and "Miss Walters," but she is also called "kid," "Janie," "princess," "blue-eyes," and

"baby," all diminutive names. The force of all these stereotypes combine to convincingly demonstrate her importance in relation to the men around her--thoroughly subordinate.

Of course, the story does feature Jane, and when she is set a task, she handles it competently. These tasks, however, are a small part of the story. She is allowed to be competent, but as a private, hers is a controlled, subordinate competence. Firehair did not allow herself to be controlled, not even by the chiefs of her tribe. The image of woman described in "G.I. Jane" is a much less incongruous image for American mass media in winter 1953 than was Firehair only months earlier. Jane has power, but it is ultimately a nonthreatening power, one that does not get in the way of male superiority. Jane reassures the male reader that despite her newfound power, she knows her place and what she is (Figure 43). In this panel from the first "G.I. Jane" story, Jane has just beaten up a criminal, but she reaffirms her role as a woman, one who may be used when necessary, but also one who accepts her status and willingly maintains it. Yet "G.I. Jane" does illustrate that after the change in women's roles brought about by the war, the image of a totally powerless and incompetent woman no longer seemed reasonable, even in a comic book newly dedicated to the male hero. When Jane finally does lead the men to the location of



Figure 43

Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1952)

the secret gear, her participation is necessary for the completion of the mission and her battle against the flames is heroic. She has power, but, unlike in the first two periods when feminine power was undercut, Jane is allowed her power because it is controlled, subordinate. The effect is little different, however.

## Conclusion

Martin Barker writes that, to be influential, comic books must accomplish two things. They must relate to some aspect of the readers' lives and then describe a transformation within the story.<sup>1</sup> Since the actual readers of comic books in the 1940s can no longer be accurately studied for the effects visited upon them, Barker's criteria seem a reasonable methodology for approaching the amorphous concept, influence. Relating in even a slight way to the reader's life gives that reader a vehicle for establishing the vicarious bond necessary for a successful comic book story. Once that bond is established and the readers have connected themselves to the progression of the story, they participate in any transformation the story includes. I would expand Barker's ideas to include a transformation within a series of comic books. Comic book readers tend to be "loyal," to read the same titles month to month, and the Rangers audience participated in several transformations during its 11-year run, the majority of which addressed the role of women.

Comic books, like most other popular art forms, survive by interesting the consumer without demanding constant interpretation of the narrative content. Comic books accomplish this through formulas, and Rangers presented a new formula for the presentation of women in each of its major periods. During the first period, the weakness of the female

characters provided the male "heroes" with a reason for their heroics; the women needed saving. During the second period, the female characters made a pretense of strength and sometimes acted competently, but the strength of women was shown to be ineffective, needing the support of men. The third and most important period featured the classic heroic formula, save that the hero was female and accomplished the task both by adopting traditionally male strengths and by demonstrating the strengths of traditionally female qualities. The last period's formula, illustrated here in only three stories, describes women as at least occasionally competent, but willingly subordinate.

The formulaic stories of the third period present images of strong women seldom paralleled in the comic book form. Yet, for a time, the comic book audience embraced Rangers and its images of women. The second of John Cawelti's four "interrelated hypotheses about the dialectic between formulaic literature and the culture that produces and enjoys it" states that

Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes towards traditional values.<sup>2</sup>

The formula established during Rangers' third period was one element salving a society smarting from uncomfortable new ideas. The repetitive representation of women as both strong

and beautiful eventually made the concept more acceptable. Mass culture criticism often finds that popular forms use "woman" as a repository for social values: home, children, love, sex, protection--all "natural" values.<sup>3</sup> Rangers, however, deposited in woman other values. Women had, during the war, proved themselves competent, intelligent, and independent, and by connecting these traits to comic book characters, readers were able to approach the idea of strong women in a manner and through a form that they knew well.

Rangers introduced the character Firehair at the beginning of 1945, about the time women were openly voicing their desires to remain in the workforce. After the war, when society attempted and, to some extent, succeeded in reestablishing the traditional image of women as dependent on men, Rangers not only continued to present images of strong women but increased their strength. During this time, Rangers' role in mass media was subversive. While advertisements placed beautiful women in the kitchen, Rangers populated the wilderness with them. While business and returning servicemen relocated women to "the grotto of eternal silence," Rangers' women made themselves heard.

It is difficult to say whether or not Rangers influenced its readers, but it certainly was in as good a position to do so as any other form of the time, and its content, considering its dissimilarity from most comic books, seems designed for that purpose. It appears more than coincidental that Fiction

House, which employed more women artists and scriptors than any other publishing house, should also present the most consistently strong female characters in comic books. That Ruth Roche eventually became co-editor with Jerry Iger of the "shop" that produced Fiction House's books supports the hypothesis that the women artists, who themselves worked in a predominantly male field, influenced what went into Fiction House's comic books.

It should be noted that the conclusions generated by this study are tentative. Because of the nature of the subject and the scope of this work, only suppositions can be offered about the place of Rangers in the 1940s social scheme as either cause or effect. This work, however, is a beginning. The critical study of comic books is fairly young, and the academic community is still developing its methodology for approaching the form. William W. Savage's work suggests the social approach this study largely adopts and I believe succeeding work will follow his example.

Unlike radio, television, and movies, comic books were not the collaborative creation of the times and technology; they were the natural progression of narrative illustration given the escapist needs of the late 1930s. Comic books are social, and that is what I have attempted to demonstrate. In their conversation with America during the 1940s, they created an as yet nearly untapped source of subjects for critical study. In my short work, I have suggested topics which alone

deserve larger treatment. How did comic books justify the dehumanization of the Japanese while glorifying our Chinese allies? What social impulses catalyzed the creation of the protection-centered "queens of the jungle" epitomized by Fiction House's Sheena? Wonder Woman alone deserves extensive treatment for her extreme feminist teachings to the girls who would, in 20 years, change politics forever. Comic books occupied a unique place in the 1940s; over 90% of children and most adults read them regularly. By analyzing what comic books supplied to this audience as fantastic, we can obtain a better understanding of how society dealt with the very real issues troubling it at the time, and through that, a better understanding of ourselves now.

**Notes****Chapter 1**

1. George Perry and Alan Aldridge, The Penguin Book of Comics (Norwich: Jarrold & Sons Ltd., 1971): 18.
2. Ibid., 35.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 95.
7. Mike Benton, The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History (Dallas: Taylor, 1989): 14. In the "Yellow Kid"'s short life, Outcault changed newspapers four times; the highly publicized, sensational war between Hearst and Pulitzer for his character led to the coining of the term, "yellow journalism."
8. Perry 96.
9. Over 500 bound collections were published in the 30 years preceding the beginning of the comic book as we know it.
10. Benton 14.
11. William Savage, Comic Books and America, 1945-1954 (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1990): 9.
12. Comic books were and are distributed a month or two before the dates printed on the covers.
13. Savage 10.

14. "'With One Magic Word . . . ' An Interview with C.C. Beck," The Comics Journal (February 1985): 60.

15. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom Comics 4 (Fiction House: April 1942): 7.

16. Savage 11

17. Ibid.

18. Coulton Waugh, The Comics (New York: MacMillan 1947): 334.

19. Ibid., 344.

20. Mike Benton, The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History (Dallas: Taylor, 1989): 32.

21. Gloria Steinem, preface, Wonder Woman (New York: Bonanza Books, 1972).

22. Savage 13.

23. Waugh 334.

24. Ibid.

25. Benton 41.

26. Ibid., 48.

27. Ibid., 43.

28. Ibid., 49.

29. Given the nature of comic book "shops" and their assembly line production of comic books, it was natural that most publishers had at least a year of war-time produced material. Often, theses stories were changed slightly, transforming the enemy from the Third Reich to the Fourth or some such ploy.

30. Ron Goulart, Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1986): 93.
31. Ibid., 94.
32. Bill Ward, "The Man behind Torchy," The Comic Book Price Guide (1978): 42.
33. Trina Robbins and Catherine Yronwode, Women and the Comics (Forestville, California: Eclipse Books, 1985): 49.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 52.
36. Ibid.
37. Carl Macek, "Good Girl Art--an Introduction," The Comic Book Price Guide (1976): 41.

## Chapter 2

1. This is true about modern works. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, critics of comic books were at their most prolific, and they never failed to apply some social conclusion to comic book content. Of course, the social effects they applied to comic books were usually such social ills as growing drug use, juvenile delinquency, and homosexuality. It is possible that these critics have made comic books analysts since uncomfortable with the idea of making social commentary from comic books.

2. William W. Savage, Jr., Comic Books and America, 1945-1954 (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1990): 11.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Ibid., 17.

5. Ibid., 17.
6. Ibid., 23.
7. Will Eisner, Comics and Sequential Art (Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985): 10.
8. Wolfgang Max Faust, "Comics and How to Read Them," Journal Of Popular Culture (Summer, 1971): 196.
9. Earl J. Coleman, "The Funnies, the Movies and Aesthetics," Journal of Popular Culture 18:4 (1985): 97.
10. Ibid., 97.
11. Heinz J. Weber, "Elements of Text-based Connectedness in Comic Stories, and some Analogies to Cinema and Written Text," Text and Discourse Connectedness (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989): 343.
12. Donald Palumbo, "The Pattern of Allusions in Marvel Comics," Proteus 6:1 (1989): 62.
13. ---, "The Marvel Comics Group's Spider-Man is an Existential Super-Hero; or 'Life Has No Meaning Without My Latest Marvels!'", Journal of Popular Culture 17:2 (1983): 67.
14. Max J. Skidmore and Joey Skidmore, "More than Mere Fantasy: POlitical Themes in Contemporary Comic Books," Journal of Popular Culture 17:1 (1983): 14.
15. Perry.
16. Goulart.
17. Benton.
18. Robert M Overstreet, ed., The Comic Book Price Guide published yearly.

19. Ernst Gerber and Mary Gerber, compilers, The Photojournal Guide to Comic Books (Minden, Nevada: Gerber Publishing, 1990).

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1. Sherna Berger Gluck, Rosie the Riveter Revisited (Boston: Twayne, 1987): 4.
2. Gluck 5.
3. Ibid., 5.
4. Ibid., 10.
5. Ibid., 17.
6. Michael Renov, "Advertising/Photojournalism/Cinema: The Shifting Rhetoric in Forties Female Representation," Quarterly Review of Film and Video 11:1 (1989): 11.
7. Gluck 14.
8. Ibid., 10.
9. Ruth Milkman, Gender at Work (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1987): 85.
10. Gluck 5.
11. Milkman 102.
12. Gluck 17.
13. Carl Macek, "Women in Comics," The Comic Book Price Guide (1978-1979): 56.
14. Ibid., 60.
15. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Real Love (Forestville, California: Eclipse Books, 1988): 46.

16. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom Comics (Fiction House: October 1941).

17 "Phantom Falcons," Rangers of Freedom Comics (Fiction House: June 1942).

#### Chapter 4

1. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom Comics (Fiction House: October 1941).

2. Such anti-intellectualism as "Superbrain" was common in comic books through the 1960's. Villains with oversized craniums set themselves up as superior but are inevitably defeated with a combination of physical strength and common sense.

3. "Jeep Milarkey," Rangers of Freedom Comics (Fiction House: October 1941).

4. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: December 1941).

5. "Double Slango Kids," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: February 1942).

6. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: February 1942).

7. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1942).

8. "Don Stuart of the Far East Rangers," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1941). Don companions are

Chinese, Sing Hi And Sing Lo. It seems we could not refrain of making racist fun even of our allies.

9. "Phantom Falcons," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: June 1942).

10. "Phantom Falcons," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: April 1943).

11. "Glory Forbes," Rangers Of Freedom (Fiction House: June 1942).

12. "Rangers of Freedom," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1942).

13. "Firehair," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1946).

14. "Firehair," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: February 1945).

15. "Firehair," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: August 1945).

16. "Firehair," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: October 1945).

17. "Firehair," Rangers of Freedom (Fiction House: December 1945).

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**Conclusion**

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