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A Not-so-Super Heroine: Ms. Marvel's Choice is not an Option

Back in 1968, Marvel comics first presented the character Carol Danvers in the *Marvel Super-Heroes* comic series issue #13, written by Roy Thomas. A security officer for the United States Air Force, Danvers meets the superhero Captain Marvel while on the job. This Captain Marvel, not to be confused with the character in the film *Captain Marvel*, is a man from the alien species Kree who was later renamed Captain Mar-vell (the name I will use when referring to him). Danvers' original purpose is being "the girlfriend," despite being a high-level government officer that could have been capable of more (Abad-Santos). Though she is not super, she still has power, but it is unfortunately disregarded. She acts as a love interest for Captain Mar-vell and remained a side character until 1977, when a redemption of her representation was made possible in her own comic series titled *Ms. Marvel*, written by Gerry Conway, later to be taken up by Chris Claremont. Marvel Comics had observed a surge of feminist comic books, so they introduced Danvers as a new female superhero.

Having absorbed some of Captain Marvel's powers through an explosion that fused his DNA to hers, Carol Danvers takes on the superhero name Ms. Marvel. This redemption for Danvers appeared very promising, but many points of her character fell flat. For the first 7 issues, Danvers is unaware that she transforms into Ms. Marvel and vice versa, limiting the power she has. In fact, she has very little power, as is demonstrated in many issues of her comic series. In multiple instances, she is incapacitated during fights and is left to be a kind of damsel

in distress when she is supposed to be the hero. At some point, she joins The Avengers, a group of superheroes who fight supervillains together. However, they do not act as heroes when Ms. Marvel's position as a hero is compromised due to an unprecedented sexual assault. The writers of *Ms. Marvel* are left at fault for these short-comings, as they do not facilitate conditions that would allow Ms. Marvel to be a powerful superhero. Ms. Marvel's character is determined by her circumstances, and those circumstances are less than stellar.

When first created, the *Ms. Marvel* comic series was promoted as feminist, with creator Gerry Conway stating that "there were definite attempts to create [a] feminist role model", referring to Ms. Marvel (Tan). This, unfortunately, is not reflected in the comics. Noelle Donnelly in her study "This Female Fights Back: Carol Danvers, Kamala Khan, and Ambivalence Towards Feminism in Ms. Marvel Comics" argues that the 1970s *Ms. Marvel* comic series is ambivalent towards feminism, as the series repeatedly contradicts itself in the feminist context (2). Carolyn Cocca questions if Ms. Marvel is even feminist at all, claiming that while Marvel Comics and the creators did have good intentions, they simply had no idea what feminism is (188). With this in mind, can Ms. Marvel be considered a feminist role model or icon, as Conway had previously suggested? When we analyze Ms. Marvel, along with her civilian identity of Carol Danvers, specifically through the lens of liberal feminism, her role as a feminist icon is indeed questionable. Liberal feminism in particular is defined by women being able to enjoy personal autonomy and having a wide range of autonomy-enabling conditions (Baehr). When we read *Ms. Marvel* with autonomy and agency in mind, we discover evidence of the ambivalence Donnelly refers to. Carol Danvers is an independent woman who makes demands for equality and freedom, but Ms. Marvel is not in control of her super-heroism. The writers are effectively feminist and non-feminist at the same time. Knowing this, I must reiterate

my question: is Ms. Marvel a feminist icon? I will argue against the claim that she is a feminist icon through inspection of Ms. Marvel's representation and the storylines surrounding her in various Marvel comic series.

Before arguing against Ms. Marvel's status as a feminist icon, the term "feminist icon" must first be defined. Feminist literary theorist Elaine Showalter defines feminist icons as women who are "rule-breakers who followed their own paths, who were determined to experience love, achievement, and fame, and who wanted their lives to matter" (Showalter 15). While this definition is specific, it does not encompass the definition of feminism that I am focusing on, particularly in the context of comic book superheroes, as this definition is specific to purely textual literature. However, I can draw on this definition in creating my own. First, I must break down the term into its two parts: "feminist" and "icon". I will be referring to the definition of liberal feminism previously mentioned, which places emphasis on autonomy and the conditions enabling it (Baehr). This definition of feminism will assist me in arguing that there is a lack of feminism in general in the *Ms. Marvel* comics.

To come to a specific definition of feminist icon, we must also define the word "icon". When defining icon, there are two different aspects to consider. An "Icon" can be a religious image, a representative symbol, a graphic representation, and a sign that suggests meaning ("Icon"), but I will be focusing on icons as representative symbols and graphic representations as Ms. Marvel is not only a character that could be representative in the sense of being symbolic, she is a graphic representation of what superheroines, and by extension women, look like. We can focus on the aspect of symbolic representation through Showalter's definition of "icon", "revered symbol" (Showalter 14). For the graphic meaning of an icon, we can look to Scott McCloud's definition "any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea" from his book

Understanding Comics (27). Showalter's definition relates directly to the idea of a role model, as they are often revered, while McCloud's definition gives us a base for graphical representation. Because Ms. Marvel is not a real woman, but instead a character and illustration, the definition of feminist icon must be adjusted through McCloud's lens. We may define "feminist icon" in the context of *Ms. Marvel* as: a character whose identity, status, and image represent the freedom and determination of women via her association with autonomy and the conditions of her autonomy. This definition acknowledges the graphic status of Ms. Marvel while appropriately applying a feminist lens. When applying this definition, it is clear that *Ms. Marvel* is not a feminist comic series featuring a feminist icon, but the character Ms. Marvel does reflect the treatment of women both during her time and today. Ms. Marvel is not necessarily anti-feminist, but rather her character and comic series do a disservice to the feminist cause that they could have more accurately represented.

Superhero as Civilian: Feminism at Work

Before analyzing Ms. Marvel as a superhero, we must first consider her civilian identity of Carol Danvers because she is Ms. Marvel's first identity. In *Ms. Marvel* #19, Ms. Marvel recounts her backstory in her memories, where we see Carol Danvers is an independent young woman that rejects the norms of both her family and society. Danvers, as a high school student, requests a loan from her father so that she can go to college (Claremont, #19: 12). Her father refuses, and he says, "Besides, you don't need college to find a good husband", but Danvers rejects this sentiment, questioning, "who said I want to spend the rest of my life playing the happy homemaker?!" (Claremont, #19: 12). Rather than feed into the gender stereotypes and rules forced upon women during the time, Danvers makes her own plan. In order to get the education that she desires, Danvers joins the Air Force, seeing their promise of

“opportunity/travel/college/education” (Claremont, #19: 12). In this case, she fits the role of “rule-breaker,” as Showalter puts it, breaking the rules of her family and following the path that she blazes for herself. Although she originally did not have conditions that enabled her autonomy, she nonetheless chose to place her autonomy at the forefront, making her own decisions in lieu of the decisions her father wanted to make for her. Her conscious actions in this part of her backstory reflect the feminist value of freedom through autonomy.

Feminist ideologies are maintained as Danvers continues to experience high levels of autonomy through the development of her career. After her enlistment into the Air Force, Carol becomes involved in strategic operations, a job that from the name sounds like it requires high skill. Carol being assigned to this job is inherently a domino effect; she would not have gained such a job that demands high skill level if she had not made the conscious choice to pursue a career. From here, her autonomy becomes even more apparent, as it allows her to become the security chief for NASA at Cape Canaveral (Claremont, #19: 13). This new occupational title indicates that she now not only has authority over herself, but over others, with this position of authority representing her strength as an independent woman who is, once again, following her own path. If knowledge of Ms. Marvel were limited to her civilian backstory as Carol Danvers, I would argue that she is a feminist icon.

Though Carol Danvers upholds feminist ideologies in her backstory, she seems to break away from this trend with her next career as an editor and writer of *Woman* magazine. She experiences a huge shift in occupation, from a position of authority to a job where she must argue with her employer for a fair salary, a nod towards the wage gap between men and women. She is once again forced to fight for control and for autonomy. In the first issue of *Ms. Marvel*, Danvers negotiates with her new employer, J. Jonah Jameson, the terms of her employment, with

Jameson bellowing, “The way I see it, a woman’s magazine should have articles that are *useful* – like new diets, and fashions, and recipes. Things like that” (Conway, #1: 5). Danvers at first does not respond to this sentiment, instead shifting to question her salary. She takes advantage of her previous position in the military, taunting “I do have something of a reputation now – and reps cost money” (Conway, #1: 5). Jameson offers a very low salary, and Danvers negotiates with him, holding firm at a fair wage for her qualifications. Once Jameson reluctantly agrees, Danvers addresses his previous statement about the content of the magazine, asserting, “And as far as diets and recipes go – forget it” (Conway, #1: 5). Though Danvers has made a drastic move from a role of authority to that of desk-job employee, the writers attempt to maintain her image as a strong woman, having her fight against the practice of underpayment. Danvers enables her autonomy in her behavior even though she once again lacks conditions that enable her autonomy. In this sense, she so far is maintaining the visage of a feminist icon as she is fighting for her own rights and freedom rather than giving in to the limitations of that freedom.

This Female Fights Back, but Not on Her Own Terms

Carol Danvers functions as a fully independent woman in control of her own choices, but the story turns itself completely on its head when it comes to her autonomy as Ms. Marvel. Upon her appearance as Ms. Marvel, the reader is left unaware of her split personality until later in the first issue of *Ms. Marvel*. The readers first meet Ms. Marvel as she is fighting crime, then [we] meet her civilian identity of Carol Danvers, but the connection is not immediately made explicit (Conway #1). The story follows Carol Danvers to her home, accompanied by her coworker Mary Jane, where Danvers suddenly collapses from an unexpected migraine (Conway, #1: 8). She asks Mary Jane to go, and proceeds to lie down on her bed, with the narrator proposing, “Perhaps there’s more to Carol Danvers than you or we can see...” (Conway, #1: 9). The story then pans

to Ms. Marvel flying through the sky, on her way to rescue J. Jonah Jameson from a kidnapping, as her “seventh sense” had warned her about, though too late (Conway, #1: 10). As she approaches the building in which she, as Carol Danvers, had just had negotiations with Jameson, she thinks, “Something odd here – I feel as though I’ve been to this place before! But – that’s impossible!” (Conway, #1: 10). This statement to herself is evidence to the reader that she is unaware of her alternative identity. However, it becomes even more clear at the end of the issue when Ms. Marvel states, “In some way I don’t understand, I’ve gained powers from the Kree – super-strength, flight, and a strange seventh sense! And one thing more – total amnesia!” (Conway, #1:15). Ms. Marvel is aware that she does not know anything about herself and has not sought to figure out who she is, therefore maintaining this separation from her identity as Carol Danvers. Though Carol Danvers is “independent”, she is ultimately dependent upon too many factors when it comes to being Ms. Marvel, which limits her autonomy as a hero and a person.

The fact that Ms. Marvel’s identities were split in the first place is a red flag for feminist claims of autonomy. This separation of identity forces the reader to question “why doesn’t she know?” and “what does this mean?” Though it is revealed why her identities are split later in *Ms. Marvel* #7, the separation means that she does not have full control of her life and choices. Though Danvers is in control of her occupation and her personal life, she is not in control of her super-heroism as her transformation into Ms. Marvel is decided for her. How is a superhero supposed to fight crime if she is not able to decide when she fights crime? If, as Carol Danvers, she watches crime unfold right in front of her, but does not get to decide to become Ms. Marvel and intervene, then her autonomy is not just lacking but entirely absent, contradicting the very thing feminism emphasizes. Her instinct or “seventh sense” steals her autonomy from her, presumably prompting the sudden onset of her headache that repeatedly preludes her

transformation. This headache, too, is cause for concern. It is generally expected that superheroes may experience physical pain, given their line of work. However, it is not expected for a superhero to experience this pain merely from their transformation from civilian to hero. Before she even transforms to her superhero identity, she already faces the physical consequences from her power as a civilian without ever having a say in it. Her autonomy not only as a superhero but as a civilian is compromised.

Superheroine in Distress

Ms. Marvel's ongoing lack of control and autonomy does not stop at her identity separation; it extends into her battles against villains and evil-doers. There are multiple times when a battle does not end in victory for the heroine Ms. Marvel, but instead in ambiguity. Though she is not captured in many instances, she still lacks control of what happens next. In *Ms. Marvel #2*, Ms. Marvel faces off against the Scorpion and the Destructor, one at a time. Ms. Marvel struggles to capture the Scorpion and is cut short in her battle against him by the Destructor. The fight itself against the Destructor is extremely short, with only a total of three hits being landed between the two of them, one being a surprise attack on Ms. Marvel as the Destructor is out of frame (Conway, #2: 16-17). From there, he attempts another attack on Ms. Marvel, Ms. Marvel misses her attack on him, then the Destructor is finally able to land a shot with his "tachyon blast" (Conway, #2: 16). This leaves Ms. Marvel almost completely incapacitated, but she is able to land one devastating hit on him with a powerful kick. He falls unconscious, but Ms. Marvel falls unconscious right beside him. While most heroes would be expected to get right back up and swiftly bring justice upon their enemy by way of the law, Ms. Marvel is unable to even move. Not only that, but this is where the issue ends, with Ms. Marvel

incapacitated and on the same level as her enemy, both spatially and in the context of their power.



(Conway, #2: 17).

At the end of the battle is when the ambiguity sets in, with the narrator itself commenting, “the surrounding crowd wonders who will wake first to claim the final victory” (Conway #2: 17). Through the very last panel, the reader can start to fill in some gaps themselves. The panel only shows Ms. Marvel and one of her enemies, with the other enemy MIA. Ms. Marvel is left unconscious and vulnerable for if that villain decides to return. Another noticeable detail is the difference in Ms. Marvel’s costume and her enemy’s, as the enemy has very clear armor, while Ms. Marvel is mostly exposed, leaving her even more vulnerable if the villains wanted to eliminate her. Lastly, the angle at which we view Ms. Marvel makes sure to leave some of her midriff in frame while accentuating the curvature of her breasts. All these details culminate to present Ms. Marvel as not a helpless hero but a helpless *woman*. This situation itself could be written off as a mere cliffhanger, enticing the reader to venture further into the reading. However, this is not a one-off experience for Ms. Marvel, as this is not the last time that she will be helpless, a damsel in distress rather than a hero.

As if being knocked unconscious was not enough, Ms. Marvel is repeatedly captured, highlighting how little control the creators and writers of the comic series give her. In times where Ms. Marvel's power should be enough to save herself, it is completely absent. For example, when she is captured by the villain Modok, Ms. Marvel tries to break free but is unable to do so because her power is literally stripped from her.



(Claremont, #7: 4)

We see from these panels that Ms. Marvel, stripped of her superhero costume, expects to be able to break out of her bindings but cannot. She attempts to make her own choices and take control of the situation, but the situation into which she is written does not enable this choice. She is bound at all her limbs, and when she tries to break out, she is struck by excruciating pain, as is demonstrated in the jagged and pointy lines that surround her body in the first panel. After she tries to break free, Ms. Marvel and the reader learn that “much of [her] power is derived from a sophisticated alien electronic webbing build into the very fabric of [her] costume” (Claremont, #7: 4). So now Ms. Marvel is not only restricted by amnesia, but by her source of power as well. Most heroes have their powers as innate abilities, not connected to their costume, or if they are

connected to their costume, it is intentional. By having her powers connected to her costume without her knowledge, Ms. Marvel is stripped of the last bit of autonomy she could have had as a superheroine.

So now Ms. Marvel is faced with three issues: her amnesia, her capture, and her lack of superpower, and readers are left wondering how she will escape this predicament. Will she realize her powers are actually innate after all? Will she play mind games with Modok to get him to release her? These two possibilities would have made sense in this situation, but they are not the actual outcome. Ms. Marvel instead is attacked by Modok's "mind-ripper" machine, which implants in her mind a vision of Modok that is "changed" (Claremont, #7: 6).



(Claremont, #7: 6).

She is once again forced into a role of “the girlfriend”, but this time for the villain, as is expressed in the illustration of them kissing (Claremont, #7: 6). But it goes even further than that, showing in the same panel an illustration of her kneeling at his feet as if she is indeed worshipping him as a god. Ms. Marvel now sees Modok as “tall and strong and... beautiful... A man she will worship as a god” (Claremont, #7: 6). The composition of the panel shows that Ms. Marvel is seeing herself in two contexts with Modok: as a lover and a worshipper. So now Ms. Marvel is faced with another problem: the clarity of her mind. The writers have not only made her situation as a superheroine more doomed, but they have also stripped her of her ability to *think* against evil as a superhero, something that is essential to her character. It is especially abhorrent that this compromise of her mind places her mentally in a position of inferiority. For Ms. Marvel to be placed in such a compromising position that she is not only unable to fight, but to think, is a clear violation of feminism which emphasizes that a woman must be provided with conditions that enable her autonomy. She is forced into subordination, a position in which she has no choice.

While it may have been appropriate for the writers to reveal at this point that Ms. Marvel’s powers were innate the whole time, and not just enabled by her costume, they do not take this opportunity to put Ms. Marvel in control. Instead, the mind-ripper machine does indeed work on her. Once Modok releases her, Ms. Marvel proceeds to fight against Modok’s underlings with her own strength but is found incapacitated when Modok simply utters the word “Stop!” (Claremont, #7: 8). With that command, Ms. Marvel does stop, even dropping her weapon, a torch, upon Modok’s command. She is now completely under the control of Modok, listening to him as he orders her to kill his captive, Agent M17, “with [her] bare hands” (Claremont, #7: 9). Ms. Marvel has effectively been transformed from a superheroine to a

supervillain. Even then, she is not a supervillain of her own choice. She is not put in control in any way. Her autonomy is not only taken away but taken *over* by external forces.

Ms. Marvel is only finally able to take control when she reaches an understanding of her dual identity. While her mind as Ms. Marvel is taken over, Carol Danvers fights for control over her body so that she can intervene against this villainy. However, the narrator states that “Carol Danvers [cries] out in impotent fury as she fights for control... and fails” (Claremont, #7: 9). In the very next panel, the narrator states, “The strain is unbearable – and then something within her soul... snaps!” (Claremont, #7: 9). Ms. Marvel suddenly sees memories, “hers, yet not hers...” as she first sees memories of herself as Ms. Marvel in training with the Kree, then memories as Carol Danvers training at the Kennedy Space Center (Claremont, #7: 10). This leads to the identities of Ms. Marvel and Carol Danvers finally colliding, allowing Ms. Marvel to finally take control of her mind and body again. Though Ms. Marvel does fix two problems – her amnesia and her mind control – it is hard to ignore that she did not have the power as a superhero to bypass the control of a villain, in this case Modok. It takes the special circumstance of her split identity to allow her to gain control again. Ms. Marvel does indeed work hard to be strong and independent, but why must she work so hard? Clearly, the writers have created a condition in which Ms. Marvel’s autonomy is disabled, which by extension disables her as a superhero.

The trend of capture almost appears to wane as Ms. Marvel fights against villains known as the Elementals, but her control of the situation becomes even worse. Ms. Marvel bears attacks from all three elementals, with their combined attacks trapping her within molten sand (Claremont, #12: 2). Though Ms. Marvel was left helpless in breaking free from Modok, here she does not struggle to escape the trap of the elementals (Claremont, #12: 3).



(Claremont, #12: 3)

Ms. Marvel does not hesitate to break out of the crystal, starting to crack it a mere two panels after its formation. She emerges from the crystal with the might of a superheroine that is fully in control of the situation, as can be seen by her powerful stance. She is not keeled over in exhaustion from breaking free, but rather punching upwards in a powerful motion. Though she was captured, following the precedent set by Modok, the writers have given her a better way to take control of the situation that focuses on her sheer power. Now that she was gaining more control, I gained more hope that she would turn out to be a feminist icon.

Though my hope was strong, her independent triumph and claim on control does not last for long. After the Elementals are beaten by Ms. Marvel, their leader, Hecate, steps in to attack Ms. Marvel. Ms. Marvel holds her own against the first attack, a robotic enemy known as a Kree Warhawk that Hecate was able to create from Ms. Marvel's mind (Claremont, #12: 4). Ms. Marvel takes advantage of her prior knowledge of the Warhawk and attacks its weak point, leading to yet another triumph. It seemed in this issue that the writers were turning around her story as a hero to make her much more efficient and powerful, but this is her last triumph in the issue as the writers do not keep up her lucky streak. Instead, they incapacitate Ms. Marvel once

again, as her defeat of the Warhawk leads to an explosion that knocks her to the ground. Though she should be able to get back up, she is unable to because of her inherently split personalities.



(Claremont, #12: 7).

As she is hunched over and unable to stand, Ms. Marvel exclaims out loud that her “head [is] pounding” and she “can feel Carol’s personality fighting for control”. As Hecate declares that Ms. Marvel will not win, Ms. Marvel can only look off into the distance as she pleads for Carol Danvers to let her be because she “can’t fight [her] and Hecate both!” Though Ms. Marvel discovered a few issues ago that she was also Carol Danvers and the problem of split identity appeared to be fixed, she is still not completely in control of when she is who. This leads to her having to fight *against herself* along with her actual enemies. Once again, Ms. Marvel is losing control not only of the situation, but of herself. Though this issue had shown promise for her as an independent superheroine with all the autonomy and control that she needed, she is lacking in the autonomy that made her strong in the first place.

While incapacitated, Ms. Marvel is relegated to the role of damsel in distress rather than superhero. As the Elementals end up betraying Hecate, they attack both Hecate and Ms. Marvel by launching a large piece of earth at them (Claremont, #12: 8). Ms. Marvel, perhaps due to the fact she is having to fight with herself, does not react as a superhero.



(Claremont, #12: 9)

In this full-page panel, Ms. Marvel is not taking the stance of a superhero that is either agilely avoiding the attack or ripping through it. Instead, she is shielding herself with her arms, as is a stance that would be seen from a civilian. Hecate, the villain that was just attacking her but two pages ago, is now the one responsible for saving Ms. Marvel's life. Ms. Marvel has been completely displaced as a superhero and assigned the role of damsel in distress by the writers. She is effectively unable to protect others and even herself, as she must be protected by others.

She has very little autonomy because the circumstances that the writers have created for her are limiting her control of herself.

Misplaced Sympathy

While Ms. Marvel repeatedly lacks control in fights, she also lacks control in the context of reproductive rights and sexual encounters. *The Avengers* #200 starts with Ms. Marvel as Carol Danvers going through labor after a 3-day pregnancy that already reached a full 3 terms (Michelinie). Danvers must give birth to this surprise child, as the pregnancy lasts for such a short amount of time that she never even had the choice of proceeding with the pregnancy or opting to terminate the pregnancy. Danvers is very distressed by the situation, as during the childbirth she expresses that she “just [wants] this to be over”. After the child is born, the Wasp tries to congratulate Danvers, but Danvers tells her, “I’ve been used! That isn’t my baby! I don’t even know who the father is!” Here, the writers make it clear that Danvers had absolutely no intention of having a child and feels violated in being forced to have one. Forcing this pregnancy on Danvers literally violates her and puts her in a position that no superhero has ever been forced into before.

After the birth of the child, it was time for the writers to reveal where it came from, and it is even more disturbing than the unstoppable pregnancy itself. Immediately after being born, the child rapidly grows within the day into Marcus, a man from Limbo that later reveals he had kidnapped Danvers, whom he had judged to be the most powerful woman on Earth, so that he could use her as a vessel to escape Limbo and be literally born again on Earth. However, he states that he “went about winning [her]” so that she would agree to his plan because he did not want to control her with “Immortus’ devices”, which would control her mind (Michelinie 32). Though he states this, he reveals in the very next panel that he put in “weeks” of efforts but took

advantage of a “subtle boost” from Immortus’ machines in order to win over Danvers (Michelinie 33).



(Michelinie 33).

Marcus then proceeds to rape Danvers while she is under his control. The panel of the rape is drawn in such a way that it looks to be consensual, as Danvers is holding onto Marcus and craning her neck to welcome his advances. Though Danvers is suffering from mind control during the event, the illustration is a gross misrepresentation of the actual event unfolding: rape. This rape is the ultimate desecration of Ms. Marvel’s character. Ms. Marvel had no choice in the matter because the writers created the conditions of kidnapping and mind-control that support this rape, leaving her with absolutely no autonomy in the situation. Kidnapping, mind-control, and rape are not conditions of autonomy to any degree and completely violate not only Ms. Marvel but the idea that she is a feminist icon.

If the rapist, Marcus, had been punished for his atrocity, then there would have been immediate justice for Ms. Marvel. But instead, the rapist goes unpunished, fully supporting the belief that the writers of Ms. Marvel’s character really do not know what feminism is. At the end

of the issue, as some of the Avengers are fighting against enemies that had emerged from the machine Marcus was working on, Ms. Marvel states that she wants to return to Limbo with Marcus (Michelinie 34).



(Michelinie 34).

Iron Man does question this for a moment, and Ms. Marvel replies that she is “not entirely” certain that she wants to proceed with this decision, but that she has been “denying [her] feelings for quite a while” and thinks she should start following them (34). This uncertainty is shown in her facial expression, as her eyebrows are scrunched at the bridge of her nose, but it is unclear what she means by “feelings”, as she does not indicate if those are feelings towards Marcus, herself, or something else. An assumption may be made that the writers are having Ms. Marvel sympathize with her rapist in this panel. And even though she admits that she is uncertain in her decision, the Avengers do not prompt her to think more about what she is deciding, even after knowing that she was previously mind controlled by Marcus. They are effectively condoning the actions of a rapist and ignoring the uncertainty of his rape victim.

Ms. Marvel ends up leaving with Marcus without another thought on the matter, as the narrator describes their leave as being “with the last flash of a grateful smile, and the wink of a hopeful eye” (Michelinie 34). After this, the Avengers “hope that Ms. Marvel lives happily ever after” (35). Never in the entirety of the issue do the writers condemn Marcus’ actions. While they do place the decision to go with him in the hands of Ms. Marvel, she has just endured a series of

traumatizing events in the form of kidnapping, mind-control, rape, and sudden childbirth and would realistically need assistance in coming to terms with these events. A person in her position is in need of support, but The Avengers do not offer that to her. Not only does the villain, who raped the hero, escape defeat, he is gifted with the hero as his lover by the writers. The writers have given sympathy not to Ms. Marvel, the victim of the issue, but to Marcus, the rapist. This sympathy is inherently misplaced and does not acknowledge the effect that sexual assault has on a woman's autonomy. In the very last panel of the issue, Hawkeye is holding Ms. Marvel's mask that she left behind, symbolizing that she is no longer a powerful superheroine (Michelinie 35). Ms. Marvel has been stripped of her choice as a superhero and her title and has by extension lost her autonomy. This issue is insulting to the idea that Ms. Marvel was intended to be a feminist role model. The one choice they gave to Ms. Marvel throughout this entire issue is a spit in the face of feminism.

Ms. Marvel is a Hero, a Person, a Woman

After her rape, Ms. Marvel is not seen again until the following year, when writer Chris Claremont connects her with the X-men. It has been established that Ms. Marvel is not a feminist icon due to the numerous handicaps placed upon her by the writers, but Claremont's story of her return attempts to reset Ms. Marvel's character, addressing the blatant mistreatment she faced at the hands of other characters and the writers. In *Avengers Annual* 10, Ms. Marvel is found and taken in by the X-men after she has escaped her rapist and the realm Limbo. When they find her, she is unable to remember who she is and what happened to her, so the X-men help her retrieve her memories. Once these memories are retrieved and Ms. Marvel knows who she is, she arranges to meet with the Avengers so that she may address their handling of her situation in *The Avengers* #200. The conversation that ensues upon their arrival does not erase the discrepancies

in Ms. Marvel's story, but it is the start of a redemption for Marvel's ambivalence towards feminism.



(Claremont, *Avengers Annual*: 34).

The Avengers arrive at the X-Men headquarters as Ms. Marvel and some X-Men are lounging by the pool. Right before addressing The Avengers, Ms. Marvel dons a jacket over her swimsuit, which shows she chooses how revealing she wants her outfits to be. Ms. Marvel offers them some iced tea to The Avengers, with Hawkeye being the first to address Ms. Marvel, stating that she is “looking real good” and that he did not expect to “see you two lovebirds again”, referring to her and her rapist Marcus. Ms. Marvel responds very briefly, stating “I’m sure you didn’t Hawkeye. Marcus is dead”. She says this without any indication of strong emotion, which would normally be seen through coloration and the shape of speech bubbles.

Then, Iron Man says they “made a wonderful couple” and asks if there is anything that they can do to help her pain. This triggers Ms. Marvel to react with sudden anger, exclaiming that the Avengers have done enough to cause her pain in the first place. Her anger can be observed in the fourth panel, as her outburst causes her to knock over the iced tea, with the colors being very harsh and bright. The coloring makes it seem as if an explosion has gone off, effectively conveying the sudden burst of anger that Ms. Marvel experiences. The creators of this issue are attempting to express just how serious the rape of Ms. Marvel is and how much such an event can negatively affect a person

The creators of *Avengers Annual* 10 did not restrict Ms. Marvel to only being emotional over her rape, but instead let her talk about her experience and condemn those who did not intervene.



(Claremont, *Avengers Annual*: 37)

Ms. Marvel effectively commands the attention of The Avengers as she tells them how the events transpired from her perspective. The panel during this monologue is very monochrome, with blue being the main color, expressing a more calm and somber tone. Even the iced tea that had previously gone off like an explosion is colored blue. Claremont makes sure that Ms. Marvel acknowledges her identities as “a hero, a person, a woman” so that The Avengers and the readers are aware that the entire character has been affected by disturbing plot. This greatly reflects the

real world, in which women who experience rape and sexual assault are often affected as a whole, not just in one part of their life. Claremont also avoids victim blaming in his story, as Ms. Marvel asserts to The Avengers, “That was your mistake.” Ms. Marvel’s explanation and condemnation of the events again does not erase the past atrocities against her character, but Claremont is attempting to turn to real feminism. At the end of the issue, Ms. Marvel firmly asserts that she will not be joining The Avengers again, which means she is making the choice to stay away from those who sympathized with her rapist instead of her. Claremont has created conditions that enable Ms. Marvel to tell her story and condemn rape apologists by introducing her to a support network through the X-Men as well as a safe space where she is allowed to process her trauma and express her emotions. Ms. Marvel is finally unrestricted.

Ms. Marvel as a Reflection

At this point, we have moved past the question of whether or not Ms. Marvel is a feminist icon and instead towards an observation of how Ms. Marvel’s treatment reflects the treatment of women in the real world. Kim Parker and Cary Funk with Pew Research Center found that “About four-in-ten working women (42%) in the United States say they have faced discrimination on the job because of their gender” (Parker). Ms. Marvel would be included in this 42% as Carol Danvers, as J. Jonah Jameson attempts to pay her a much lower wage presumably because she is a woman. The University of Kentucky’s Center for Research on Violence Against Women observes a study of rape cases that found that “only 37% of reported rapes are prosecuted” and only “18% of prosecuted rape cases end in a conviction” (1). This shows that many women do not see their rapist face repercussions for their actions. This would have been the case for Ms. Marvel as well had Marcus not died. Though these statistics leave out the very personal and individual stories of these women, the numbers show just how much Ms.

Marvel is facing problems of the average woman in her storylines. Ms. Marvel is definitely not a feminist icon, but she is a symbol that women can relate to in these struggles.

Conclusion

Feminist icon is a tricky term to define and an even trickier term to apply. It is especially tricky to apply it to Ms. Marvel, as although there are many times where her dialogue and actions support feminist ideologies, she is not written into situations that allow this feminism to gain traction. This is the origin of ambivalence towards feminism that Donnelly refers to. Ms. Marvel was written with the idea that she would be a “feminist role model”, as claimed by writer Gerry Conway (Tan), but the contradictory plot and conflicts damn that sentiment. In fact, these contradictory points provide evidence that although she was written with good intentions, the writers of Ms. Marvel “[had] no idea what feminism is” (Cocca 188). This certainly can be attributed to the fact that men were still dominating the writing world. They did not truly grasp the issues of women during their time, and those same issues still persist today. Ms. Marvel, like many women of her time and now, faced workplace discrimination, subordination, and sexual assault often without apology, and that was what truly damned her status as a feminist icon. Though a misunderstanding of feminism does not excuse the horrible representation of feminism, writers who have learned from the atrocious representation of Ms. Marvel are working on female characters with a truer understanding of feminism, and comic books may introduce a new superheroine who is powerful, in control, and can be a *real* feminist icon.

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