The Damsel is not Distressed: Dismantling the Sex/Gender System in *Avengers: Endgame*

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What makes a Marvel movie so incredible? Is it the A-list actors? The visual spectacle? The intricate soundtrack that perfectly captures the intensity of an action-packed fight sequence? I would argue that even more than great actors, spectacle, or sound, we want to see something different. We want the Marvel characters we know and love, but we want to see them in a story that strikes us as new and relevant. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) does this by taking female perspectives seriously and adding a strong dose of postmodern feminism. In this essay, I demonstrate how female characters such as Nebula (Karen Gillan), Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson), and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) expand and even break from the expected norms for female heroines in Marvel films, not to mention social norms for real-world women. My aim is to show how it may well be important to read *Avengers: Endgame* as a feminist film.

Gayle Rubin argues that gender roles are constructed by a complex "sex/gender system" that varies by culture and time period but tends to include such things as marriage rituals (the "exchange of women"), the commodification of gender and sex roles ("the sexual division of labor"), and objectification, especially of the female body ("sex…is itself a social product").[1] These are the kinds of traditional systems that create, naturalize, and sustain gender stereotypes. Feminism in the 21st century has set out to question, denaturalize, and critique such stereotypes as well as the institutions and systems that produce them. Rubin's complex ideas can help us read *Avengers: Endgame* and elaborate on its feminist ideas.

Drawing on work by the anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Rubin explains the power of established familial systems as the "exchange of women." Rubin writes, "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is

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1 Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 28, 37, 32.

the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (37). In many cultures and historical eras, that is, women have been perceived as objects to be exchanged between men rather than equal partners within relationships. The character of Nebula in *Avengers: Endgame* is a good example of this male-dominated system as well as of how the film challenges it. She begins as the subservient daughter (and obedient servant) of the film's villain, Thanos. While she seems to understand her servitude as loyalty and love for her father, the audience sees it more clearly as destructive, blind obedience, especially when he tortures her to get what he wants. Thanos abuses her loyalty to him, putting his desires before her needs. Later in the film, she finally breaks free from him to help save half of the human population. In this way, the film comments on the need to dismantle and break from understandings of relationships that situate women as powerless servants to male desires. She becomes one of the key heroes of the story only after she rejects her father, bonds with Gamora, her sister, and makes decisions for herself. Her resilience is further emphasized when she encounters her alternate self. Nebula's past self (still under the thrall of Thanos) tells her double "you're weak" and "you disgust me," but we are encouraged to understand this as projection, an indication of Nebula's self-hatred for her submission to Thanos: "I'm you," responds Nebula's future self. Far from "weak," we see her at her strongest when she breaks from her father's control and fights to defeat him.

Male power over women is often fed by stereotypes such as the presumption that femininity is passive and masculinity is active. Rubin expands on this idea when she discusses the social power ascribed to the male body, and the "phallus" in particular: "Any organ…can be the locus of either active or passive eroticism. What is important in Freud's scheme, however, is not the geography of desire, but its self-confidence. It is not an organ which is repressed, but a segment of erotic possibility" (49). Rubin is suggesting that while the female body has been associated with passivity (passive desire) and the male body with activity (active desire), the more significant difference between masculinity and femininity lies in "self-confidence." While tradition would have it that our bodies determine that women should be passive, the real distinction should be understood as social and psychological, not physical. Bodily difference does not preclude the "self-confidence" that would allow women to reject the stereotype of passive femininity and actively pursue their desires. This is illustrated with Valkyrie's character.

Near the end of the film, Valkyrie returns to her home, New Asgard, with Thor. She mentions the importance of his continued rule. Thor tells her that he no longer plans on being king but will pass the role to her. With this moment, the film challenges the stereotype of passive femininity. The history of leadership in Asgard has been patriarchal, encouraging the passivity of women within the realm. Valkyrie accepts this new position and steps into an active leadership role with confidence, regardless of gender and sex difference.

Elaborating on sex and gender as more about social values than physical differences, Rubin suggests that "sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product" (32). The differences between the sexes are social fictions. The gender roles naturalized by such fictions are also, then, simply products of such systems. The narrative of sacrifice is an example of such a fiction. In most films following the standard superhero narrative, men sacrifice and women support. It is the men who sacrifice themselves, putting the lives of others before their own. *Avengers: Endgame* specifically refuses that narrative with the character of Natasha (also known as Black Widow). Natasha makes the ultimate sacrifice in one of the most pivotal moments in the film. Both she and Clint (Jeremy Renner) go to Vormir to retrieve the soul stone. They are informed that they must sacrifice a soul to get the stone. They both offer their lives but, ultimately, Natasha gives her life to save Clint and acquire the stone that promises to save the world. It's important to note, however, that the two fight each other beforehand over who should make the sacrifice. We can take that struggle to be an illustration of the film's interest in dismantling gendered expectations. Clint sees it as his duty to save Natasha and redeem himself through sacrifice. This intention aligns perfectly with the expected, masculinized narrative pattern: the boy saves the girl, sacrifices himself, and achieves redemption. But Clint doesn't seem to understand that Natasha, a woman, might appropriately perform that same function: save the boy, sacrifice herself, and redeem the world. As Natasha tells him, "I'm trying to save your life, you idiot." This is a feud over the "division of labor" by sex in narrative terms (Rubin, 30). The film thematizes the struggle over whether men or women should perform the sacrifice function, ultimately breaking from the traditional narrative, making Natasha, not Clint, the savior and redeemer.

Rubin illustrates the consequences of the "division of labor by sex" when she writes that it functions to divide the sexes "into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and thereby creates gender. The division of labor can also be seen as a taboo against sexual arrangements other than those containing at least one man and one woman, thereby enjoining heterosexual marriage" (39). The stark, binary opposition of the sexes adds to the previously established idea of sex as a "social product." It naturalizes binary understandings of gender roles and institutionalizes double-standards created by society. The

production team for *Avengers: Endgame* seems to understand this. When the women in the film fight against villains and navigate plot conflicts, they also do battle with traditional gender expectations.

During the final fight of the film, Captain Marvel is ready to transport the infinity gauntlet. It is then that Peter Parker (Spider-Man), mentions that there are a lot of villains in her path. Okoye states, "She's got help." This phrase sets the scene as the camera tracks, capturing the lead women in the film who line up to fight alongside Captain Marvel. This scene is one of the most powerful in the film. Captain Marvel could be assisted by any other group of superheroes, or she could fight the villains off by herself, but she doesn't. She is supported by all her fellow female heroes. The film thus suggests, in highly dramatic fashion, that women are no longer the damsels in distress; instead, the damsels are warriors essential to winning the battle.

Rubin's ideas highlight the damaging impacts of the social fictions dividing the sexes. The women in *Avengers: Endgame* revise such entrenched expectations and the narratives they authorize. The women in the film demonstrate strength and individuality. From their bravery to their drive to save others, they work to break barriers—both individually and together. Throughout the entirety of *Avengers: Endgame*, the sense of change goes beyond just the film. While breaking barriers in the cinematic universe, the change prompts necessary social change. ❦

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Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, Routledge, New York, NY, 1997, pp. 27–62.

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