

# The Holloway-Bryne-Marston Feminist-Scientific Critique of Freud

Matthew J. Brown

Center for Values in Medicine, Science, and Technology

The University of Texas at Dallas

mattbrown@utdallas.edu @thehangedman

## **Abstract**

In this talk, I explicate the critique of Freudian psychoanalysis developed by Elizabeth Holloway Marston, Olive Byrne, and William Moulton Marston, and I argue that this critique is unique for its blending of feminism, science, and popular culture. I make this argument through the lens of feminist epistemology, particularly standpoint theory, as well as through the connections between intellectual production, science in particular, and popular culture.

## **Background**

That Freud's work and traditional Freudian psychoanalysis have a sexist strain is well-known and not particularly controversial. Their theories and practices presuppose and seek to reinforce heteropatriarchy and capitalism. There are many classic feminist critiques of Freud, from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler. These critiques focus on several aspects of Freud's thought, from his association of the libido with masculinity, his theory of penis envy, and his treatment of women patients like Dora. Many of the critiques are straightforward feminist arguments that he presupposed the androcentric values of his Victorian context as natural features of human development, not recognizing these social constructs for what they are.

Elizabeth Holloway Marston, Olive Byrne, and William Moulton Marston (who I will refer to collectively as “HMB”)<sup>1</sup> collaborated on many of their works and lived together as a family, and they developed a unique and under-appreciated critique of Freud. HMB were not working in a psychoanalytic tradition, but rather were educated primarily in physiological, structuralist, and functionalist psychology. HMB each were exposed to feminist ideas through their undergraduate education or family connections—Byrne was the daughter of Ethel Byrne and niece of Margaret Sanger. Each had advanced degrees in psychology. Together they developed and defended a radical gynocentric feminism. HMB developed an innovative approach to psychology that anticipated later developments in positive psychology and cognitive neuroscience. They wrote from a standpoint that included two women, an unconventional family structure, and radical feminist politics, in a way that moved fluidly between politics, science, and popular culture and challenged the very lines of division between them.

The nexus of these lines of thought comes early in *Emotions of Normal People* (1928): “I submit that the backbone of literature has been transplanted intact into psychology, where it has proved pitifully inadequate”(ENP, 3-4). By “the backbone of literature” they mean commonsense ideas about emotions and

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<sup>1</sup>Holloway and Marston knew each other from at least the age of 12, and already while undergraduates, while courting, they were also collaborating. Marston credits Holloway with the basic idea for the lie detector test, for which they were famous. They did the basic work on the test in Hugo Münsterberg’s lab while undergraduates. Once Byrne joined them in 1925, she also became part of the collaboration, as a research assistant to Marston and later as a psychologist in her own right. Her 1927 Columbia Master’s thesis was incorporated almost in its entirety into the book *Emotions of Normal People* (1928), uncredited, with William Marston was listed sole author of the book. (The dedication of the book reads: “To my teachers and collaborators: My Mother, Claribel Moulton Waterman [Marston’s aunt], Elizabeth Holloway Marston, Marjorie Wilkes Huntley, Olive Byrne.”) Byrne’s contribution to conducting experiments at Jackson College (Tufts) is acknowledged elsewhere in the text.

Historical work has shown extensive collaboration between Holloway, Byrne, and Marston on much of their work. Because such collaborations were often uncredited, I have chosen here to refer to the bulk of their work (from 1928 onward) by the collective abbreviation “HMB” for “Holloway-Byrne-Marston.” The threat of over-attribution of credit, most of which credited to William Marston or the pen name Charles Moulton, to Holloway and Byrne seems to me much less worrisome than the historical injustice of definite under-attribution. I have chosen to omit Marjorie Wilkes Huntley’s name from the collaboration, as I have not been able to confirm a significant intellectual contribution by Huntley to this work, though it seems clear that she made at least editorial contributions.

psychology, which on HBM's view presupposes and reinforces much about the status quo, despite the status quo itself being profoundly dysfunctional. Near the end of that same work, they write:

The only practical emotional re-education consists in teaching people that there is a norm of psycho-neural behaviour, not dependent in any way upon what their neighbours are doing, or upon what they think their neighbours want them to do. (ENP 1928, 391)

This is the connection that allows them to use scientific results to defend a radical political vision of women's liberation and eventually matriarchal society, while their outsider standpoint allows them a critical distance to reject the status quo in the first place.

HBM were not content, and perhaps were not able, to stay within the realm of academic psychology. Their post-academic work was even more prodigious than their academic work was. They advocated the lie detector test that their research helped to develop. Holloway worked as an editor for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and HBM's views made it into several articles penned by William Marston. Marston himself was the credited author of three pop-psychology or self-help books in the early twentieth century heyday of that genre. Starting in 1935, they published a series of articles in *Family Circle* under Olive Byrne's pseudonym "Olive Richards" in which Byrne purportedly interviewed the "famous man" and "noted scientist," William Moulton Marston, in order to promote their views. William Marston worked as a legal consultant, a therapist, and as a consulting psychologist for the movie and comic book industries. Perhaps HBM's most lasting contribution is the creation of the comic book character *Wonder Woman*, which they wrote from 1941 until Marston's untimely death in 1947. What's more, *Wonder Woman* amounts to an attempt at a transplant back into literature, or pop culture generally, of a more adequate psychological backbone, an attempt at the "re-education" of common sense.

## Anti-Freud in HBM's Psychology

The Marstons' critique of Freudian psychoanalysis emphasized Freud's focus on *conflict* as a driving factor of human psychology. Conflict, for HBM, was a constant only in *abnormal*, usually male, psychology, and the emphasis on

it as central to *all* psychology could be seen from their perspective as an androcentric bias. Here is how HBM characterize psychoanalysis:

On the whole, we may characterize psycho-analysis as a system of thought which assumes a continuous state of bodily conflict between the vitalistic-type causes, having their origin in the libido or in consciousness itself, and the mechanistic-type causes springing from environmental stimuli. (ENP 1928, 22)

In later work, they elaborate, “They call the life energy the Libido. The Libido is continually fighting an antagonistic environment for self-expression”(IP 1931, 40).

It is important to note that Freud’s *libido* is a masculine principle:

Indeed, if we were able to give a more definite connotation to the concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, it would even be possible to maintain that libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespectively of whether its object is a man or a woman. (3E 1905)

In a later edition, Freud includes a long discursive footnote that clarifies that he means “masculine” vs “feminine” in what he calls the “psychological” sense of the term, as activity and passivity, respectively. He distinguishes this from the biological sense (which concerns gametes) and the sociological sense (which concerns gender identity and socially assigned gender).

It is central to the Marstons’ view that the fundamental forces of psychology are those that govern a *healthy* mind, and furthermore, that a state of *conflict* is only healthy as a temporary episode of necessary engagement with a hostile environment, whereas permanent conflict is a sign of dysfunction. Contrast the conflict-oriented view of human sexuality, attributable to Freud, with HBM’s view of love:

The normal relationship consists of complete adaptation of appetite to love... Love is a giving, and not a taking; a feeding, and not an eating; an altruistic alliance with the loved one, and not a selfish conflict with a ‘sex object’. (ENP, 381-82)

HMB don’t just call out Freudian theory for having sexist overtones or implications; indeed, political values do not appear as premises in their argument. They bring to bear criticism based on what Helen Longino calls “public

standards” or “shared standards,” primarily in terms of purported scientific experimental evidence, the current state of neurology, and considerations of psychological theory. Appeal to controversial, radical values in a scientific work is strategically hopeless and scientifically questionable. Appeal to scientific evidence, both in terms of experiments and neurophysiology, as well as general theoretical considerations, is a stronger basis for what feminist epistemologists call “transformative criticism.”

Arguing in this way, HBM defend a psychological view that radically revises our concepts of basic emotions, where happiness is ultimately the central marker of psychological health, love is central to a happy life, and love requires submission to a loving female authority. Along the way, HBM defend the normalcy of lesbian sexuality; they re-describe heterosexual sex as the female body “capturing” male, rather than the standard male body “penetrating” the female; and they argue for the intellectual and material liberation of women and the eventual “active love leadership of humankind by women”(ENP 396).

## Wonder Woman’s Psychological Message

HBM’s *Family Circle* articles promoted their psychological, sexological, and social views. After an article on comics in 1940, William Marston established a relationship with Maxwell Charles Gaines, co-publisher of All-American Comics, and was asked to sit on their editorial board. HBM took this opportunity to propose to Gaines a female superhero comic, which Gaines asked Marston to write. They used the pseudonym “Charles Moulton,” after Gaines’s and Marston’s middle names. In a letter signed by William Moulton Marston to the early comics historian Colton Waugh, HBM write: “Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.”

Wonder Woman teaches by example the “the pleasure of submission” to a loving female authority and the evils of male domination. Wonder Woman is unique among superhero comics of the time for an emphasis on reforming criminals over retribution for their crimes. Each of these themes draws in different ways on Marston’s theory of emotions, on his particular views about the nature of healthy, loving relationships, on his views about the capabilities of the sexes, and on his views of the origins of “abnormal” behavior (including criminality).



Figure 1: Image of Wonder Woman from “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics” (1943-44)

## The Freudian Assault on the Comics

William Moulton Marston died young, in 1947. After that, Holloway and Byrne, as well as editor Sheldon Mayer, were cut out of the production of *Wonder Woman* comics, and Robert Kanigher took over, removing entirely the aspects of Wonder Woman that Marston had so carefully cultivated (see Fig. 2). No longer did *Wonder Woman* provide an example of Marston’s vision of psychological health and a radical feminist social order. The comics that began appearing by Kanigher could not even be described as feminist in a conventional (for late 1940’s) way.

The battle between Marston and the Freudians reappeared in the battle over censorship of comic books in the 1950s, with Fredric Wertham presenting the orthodox Freudian case against the comics. Wertham described the depiction of women in *Wonder Woman* comics thus:

They do not work. They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent. Even when Wonder Woman adopts a girl there are Lesbian overtones. . . In no other literature for children has the image of womanhood been so degraded. (SI 1954, 234)

Depictions of lesbianism and the failure to act homemakers and mothers are psychologically detrimental themes, claims Wertham, because they teach



Figure 2: Cover of *Sensation Comics* #94, Nov. 1949 – What Wonder Woman looked like shortly after Marston’s death.

the opposite of normal, healthy womanhood. For the orthodox Freudian, successfully finding one’s place in heteropatriarchy and capitalism are the mark of psychological health. Wertham’s sexism and traditionalism are thus entirely representative of the Freudian tradition; his “conservative moralizing” is founded in psychoanalytic theory (Rhodes, 63). Wertham’s critiques found an audience in early Cold War America, and led to outraged parents and Congressional hearings. Strict censorship of comics followed, undertaken by the industry itself for fear of government regulation, through the creation of the Comics Code Authority.

Marston’s death in 1947 raises a question: What would have happened if Marston had not died young, but had lived through Wertham’s campaign against the comics? What if a credentialed psychologist with Marston’s publishing record (and charm), with the chops at arguing against Freudians, had been able to answer Wertham? The contingency of Marston’s untimely death apparently foreclosed the possibility of Wertham being confronted with HBM’s critiques. Neither Byrne nor Holloway had a platform in 1950’s America for defending those views, nor even the ability to carry on their vision for *Wonder Woman*, but what if they had? What if Marston had survived? The history of comics, perhaps, and of *Wonder Woman*, almost certainly, could have been different.

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