

Captain Marvel: The Defiance of Female Gender Roles

The concept of gender is a very complex and open-ended notion that continuously evolves as society changes. The history of gender includes a variety of perspectives on what it means to be associated with a particular gender and the expectations that come with it. Although traditional views of gender have supported the idea that gender is solely a biological aspect of who we are, scholars who have studied gender have disputed such beliefs. Philosophers such as Judith Butler, Emily Martin, and Michael S. Kimmel have studied the concept of gender and how it has been constructed throughout time.

In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler argues that everyone appropriates and approximates gender when engaged in gender performance. Due to how gender contributes to this "copying," i.e., repetition, this action creates what is being copied. Therefore, one could say that gender is fluid and not strictly associated with our biological bodies. One can then see the deep-rooted correlation between gender and cultural associations and how gender constructions are formed.

Following such gender performance actions is Carol Danvers, AKA Captain Marvel, in the 2019 film *Captain Marvel*. Her unusual characteristics as a female superhero enable her to challenge traditional femininity beliefs. Thus, through Captain Marvel's adaptation of masculine performance and rejection of feminine performance, she can challenge the traditional belief that women are weak damsels in distress who need to be saved by men.

In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler argues that gender identity is the performance of repetitive actions whose meaning is derived from associations. Butler says, "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 313), which means that it is

the continuous performance of gender that composes gender constructs. Butler argues that gender is, in reality, an act of mimicry and that there is 'no original' and "There is no "proper" gender" (312). Thus, gender can be seen as fluid and perhaps as "non-existing" due to how it is a pattern constructed by representation.

A perfect illustration of gender performance is the female superhero from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Captain Marvel. In Captain Marvel, she strongly adopts masculine performances and rejects traditional feminine performances. Captain Marvel is not your usual over-sexualized woman superhero. She is physically strong and considered one of the strongest superheroes in the Marvel Universe. Her stance depicts confidence, and her body emanates strength and pride.

In the TIME Magazine article, "Marvel Not at The Superhero's Gender," Eliana Dockterman states: "Captain Marvel exemplifies a completely different kind of female strength, one that some men may find more threatening" (Dockterman 48). Dockterman illustrates how Captain Marvel challenges femininity by containing some narcissistic swagger qualities like the male superhero Iron Man (48). Captain Marvel is strong, and she knows it. She tells her male enemies in battle, "Try to keep up" (Captain Marvel) because she knows she can take them down alone. Furthermore, we see how Captain Marvel rejects feminine performance when she responds with violence. Something women aren't traditionally associated with when being referred to as a "young lady."

After the character Nick Fury continuously calls her young lady, triggered, she replies, "Call me young lady again, and I'm gonna put my foot in a place it's not supposed to be" (Captain Marvel). It is clear how Captain Marvel wants to be seen as the grown and strong

woman she is, not a weak child-like individual. Furthermore, Captain Marvel is not interested in being liked or admired; she is a stern woman who does not care to smile, "She's cocky and pugnacious" (49), as Dockterman puts it. She constantly adopts masculine performance through her characterizations, one being her seriousness and the fact that she rarely smiles. She is on a mission to save the world; Captain Marvel has no time to worry about men telling her to "smile more."

When we see gender through a performative lens, as Butler explains it, we can challenge traditional sexist stereotypes. We see this through Captain Marvel and her adaptation of masculine performance. Through her strength, seriousness, brutality, and cockiness, she rejects feminine performance and challenges the traditional feminine stereotype of women being weak.

In "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles" by Emily Martin, we read how society has depicted women as being less worthy than men and as "weak damsels in distress" (Martin 500). In contrast, men are viewed as "strong male rescuers" (500). Martin shows how the egg and the sperm are described metaphorically to illustrate the inequities in the female and male reproductive systems. She then explains how such sexist metaphors create disparities in society regarding one's gender.

Through the apparent sexist stereotypes used in science to describe the female and male reproductive system, Martin illustrates how such imagery "Keeps alive some of the hoariest old stereotypes about weak damsels in distress and their strong male rescuers" (500). These stereotypes then lead to a wide range of inequities in society between women and men, where women are subject to oppression and forced to be seen as "weak" in society's eyes.

However, many women, such as Captain Marvel, challenge those stereotypes by refusing to accept patriarchal dominance. Captain Marvel challenges the stereotype Martin uses in her

essay that women are weak damsels in distress that need the saving of men through her soldier-like qualities and strength. She is a part of the Kree Imperial Militia, where she obtains most of her fighting skills. When she realizes that her male trainer, Yon-Rogg, has been making her suppress her ultimate powers unconsciously, she tells him, "I'm kind of done with you telling me what I can't do" (Captain Marvel). BOOM! She single-handedly rejects being overpowered by the patriarchy.

Captain Marvel does not need help or saving from a man. She is, after all, one of the strongest superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. When she discovers the truth regarding her origin and how her own kind, the Kree, caused the accident that led her to her current alien life, she goes against them to save the world. Not once does Captain Marvel need saving from a man to accomplish her mission. Instead, "She refuses the sexist and rather boring tropes of the male savior or the man who enables the woman to reach her full potential" (Curtis 10). Captain Marvel alone is able to uncover the truth about her past, and her strength is derived from her past life friendship, Maria, instead of a romantic relationship with a man. She's a strong and independent soldier who knows her worth and recognizes her powers by being cocky and not letting men overpower her.

Furthermore, Martin encourages to "wake up" the metaphor because "sleeping metaphors" continue to perpetuate sexist gender roles and stereotypes. She states that "Waking up such metaphors, by becoming aware of their implications, will rob them of their power to naturalize our social conventions about gender" (501). This is exactly what the 2019 film Captain Marvel does; it "wakes up" the metaphor to challenge the belief that women are weak and need saving from men. Captain Marvel's qualities of a soldier, alien powers, intelligence, and independence, enable her to challenge the stereotypes of women being weak. Without the help of

a man and with the assistance of her long-lost friend, Maria, Captain Marvel is able to save the world while simultaneously breaking down stereotypes.

Michael S. Kimmel supports Judith Butler's connection between gender performativity and social constructions. Kimmel illustrates in his essay, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," how masculinity is, in fact, a performance based on men's fear of being emasculated. Kimmel supports his claim that "Homophobia and sexism go hand in hand" (Kimmel 215) by reiterating the fear that men have of being depicted as less masculine and being viewed as feminine, sissies, and emotional. This makes men exaggerate their masculinity which often involves putting women down and discriminating against gay men. They do this in order for them to feel like the authoritative figure and demonstrate their strong-willed manliness. Through this, women and gay men are then forced to become the "other" in the eyes of society.

Although Kimmel argues that through men's exaggerated masculinity, women become the oppressed "other" in society, Captain Marvel strongly challenges toxic masculinity and refuses to become the other. In one of the most controversial scenes in *Captain Marvel*, performer Brie Larson was wrongly accused of being a violent men hater by many moviegoers. The scene takes place outside a shop where Captain Marvel is reading a map, and a man on a motorcycle pulls up and comments on her superhero suit. In a condescending tone, he tells her: "Nice scuba suit, do you need a ride darlin'" (*Captain Marvel*). Captain Marvel exasperatedly ignores him, to which he replies with the good ol' "How bout' a smile for me" (*Captain Marvel*). Throughout this entire scene, the male character acts as if he is being helpful to a "lost young girl." He claims to have offered his help through his unsolicited commentary, and therefore, he now DESERVES a smile from her.

However, Captain Marvel does not give in to his overly macho man energy. Instead, the same macho energy is reciprocated. She replies, "How about a handshake?" (Captain Marvel). The man gives her his hand, and with her strong alien powers, she overpowers him and squeezes his hand to the point where he's in excruciating pain. This scene perfectly depicts how Captain Marvel refuses to allow this male character to become the authority and overpower her. Instead, Captain Marvel becomes THE authority. She has complete power over him, and she gives him a proposition. The man can give her his jacket, helmet, and motorcycle; in turn, SHE will let him keep his hand. At this point, the man is on his knees on the ground, pleading for her to take his stuff. When he finally gives her his things, Captain Marvel mischievously responds, "What, no smile?" (Captain Marvel). Here we see how Captain Marvel challenges male supremacy and refuses to be seen as the "other" by becoming the authority and overpowering the patriarchy through masculine performativity.

By using such a condescending tone and unsolicited narrative, the male character wants to intimidate Captain Marvel. Through his intimidation, he would then have expected her to give in to his desires. This would have resulted in Captain Marvel becoming yet another victim of patriarchal oppression. However, we must not forget who Captain Marvel is. She is the first-ever Avenger and the strongest one yet. Her alien powers, strength, independence, and confidence enable her to stand against the patriarchy. Throughout the movie, Captain Marvel continuously demonstrates her potential, her strength, and how she does not need a man.

As Neal Curtis states in "Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: The (Dis)Continuity of Gender Politics," "Captain Marvel is completely independent in her ability to win the day" (Curtis 14). Her intelligence and strength enable her to refuse to succumb to a world of exaggerated masculinity and being oppressed. Instead, through her cockiness, she becomes the

authority and challenges toxic masculinity by engaging in performative masculinity herself. She acts cocky, authoritative, and condescending, making the male character do what SHE wants. She lets him know who is in charge by overpowering him physically and outsmarting him through her condescending attitude.

Kimmel states in his essay, "Manhood is equated with power – over women, over other men" (Kimmel 217). If that is the case, Captain Marvel is a part of manhood like any other man due to how she overpowered the male character. Thus, by becoming a part of the manhood sphere, she refuses to be overpowered by the patriarchy and become the other, as women have been forced to. Furthermore, the motorcycle scene, as it has famously come to be known, is yet another example of how Captain Marvel challenges toxic masculinity by engaging in masculine performativity. She does not need a man to help or save her because she already has all the qualities men believe make a man strong and smart. She's powerful, stern, and cocky, and as she exclaims to her deceiving mentor, "I have nothing to prove to you" (Captain Marvel). Her conspicuous strength and cocky stance already make the audience know the power she has within her. Once again, through her strength, self-reliance, and stern "don't mess with me" attitude, she is able to challenge the belief that women are the other in society and weak individuals.

Gender is such a convoluted concept that one must keep an open mind to truly comprehend it. Philosophers such as Judith Butler, Emily Martin, and Jimmy S. Kimmel have demonstrated how gender is not just biological but an evolving notion that continuously changes as society does. Thus, gender can be seen as fluid and, as Captain Marvel demonstrates, as a performance of repetitive actions. Through Captain Marvel's continuous acceptance of masculine performances, she rejects feminine performances and refuses to be overpowered by male

supremacy. By Captain Marvel accepting masculine performances, she challenges the belief that women are weak damsels in distress who need to be saved by men. She is cocky, confident, brutal, and powerful, and her strength enables her to conquer sexism and dismantle stereotypes. In conclusion, by acknowledging how gender is fluid, we can see it through a more inclusive and non-binary perspective. Therefore, we must be open to understanding gender through various perspectives and not be influenced by stereotypes that could negatively impact the reality of it.

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