DO BIOPICS SHARE any generic codes and conventions? Surely the historical status of protagonists is not sufficient criteria to form a genre. Perhaps to call a film a “biopic” is a misnomer. Rick Altman argued a similar point in his seminal text *Film/Genre*, namely, that in early Hollywood, “biopics” were produced and marketed as part of already existing genres. He notes that producers were less interested in broad categorizations such as “biopic” and instead incorporated biographical pictures into profitable cycles. Specific elements of previously successful films were replicated and publicized with multiple points of entry and interest for the possible spectator (38ff), such as, stereotypical characters, recycled plot points, and typecast actors. Additionally, in producing and marketing biographical pictures, studios would couple genres such that moviegoers of all genders could find something to enjoy: in fashioning “biopics” as Western romances or epic dramas, producers appealed to the widest possible audience (58-59).

In Angela Robinson’s *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017), we can identify the same cycle/genre games. On the one hand, the film is “Based on the incredible true story… [of] The origin of an icon,” as the DVD packaging attests. There is something like a biopic here: a man struggles against all odds to create something significant, in this case, the comics superhero Wonder Woman. However, the film itself deploys the codes and conventions of Hollywood’s generic archetype – the melodrama (Lang 47) – thereby defying “biopic” expectations.

Instead of the struggles of a creative genius coupled with a secondary story of romance, *Professor Marston* is primarily a melodrama about a polyamorous triad: William Moulton Marston (Luke Evans), his wife, Elizabeth “Betty” Holloway (Rebecca Hall), and their lover Olive Byrne (Bella Heathcote). In a supplementary interview on the DVD, Hall suggests that *Professor Marston* is “A classic film in the Golden Age of Hollywood… except this is a love story between three people.” The Golden Age here is, of course, the epoch of melodramas, and Robinson’s film is truly a melodrama fitted for the second decade of the 21st century: a BDSM-themed story with strong female leads. The film positions itself in the cycle of contemporary romance – reminiscent of...

For Altman, melodramas are spectacles; the characters’ display of emotions and the presented episodes are in excess of the narrative function (qtd. in Williams, 603-604; cf. Elsaesser 507, 509). It is this excess that then makes its appeal to spectators’ emotions, usually intensified by music (Lang 49-50). Robinson certainly alters details of Marston’s life in favour of emotional intensity. Depicting Marston as true-to-life seems less concerning than her efforts to showcase the melodramatic imperative; as Marston mentions a few times, love conquers all and “the world can’t stop us.” While the first half of the 20th century would see Marston’s naivety put to the test, this film’s production and release in 2017 is timely: as heteronormativity and compulsory monogamy wane, love can flourish like never before.

Professor Marston employs a familiar melodrama device: recollections of the past through a key moment set in the present. When the story begins in 1943, Marston is hounded by Josette Frank of the Child Study Association of America (Fig. 1). Her concern? That the sadomasochism and latent homosexuality depicted in comics featuring the Amazon hero would influence children’s morals and behaviour. Marston was called upon to defend Wonder Woman, a character who debuted in All Star Comics in December 1941 (Fig. 2). He accounts for the character, the plots, and the kink by referring to his psychological theory, DISC: dominance, inducement, submission, and compliance. He suggests that we can best explain human behaviour through four categories: 1) Dominance is the drive to subjugate a weaker force; 2) compliance marks the reluctant position of giving into the stronger force; 3) inducement is the act of convincing, even rewarding, a weaker force into the final category; 4) willing submission. Since Marston believed that people are happiest when submitting to a loving authority – and men are prone to more aggressive forms of dominance and compliance – women should be in power, ruling with peace and love, inducement and submission. “Frankly,”
he said, “Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, I believe, should rule the world” (Lepore 190-191).

Through the Professor’s defense of Wonder Woman, we flash back not to the character’s humble beginnings but to the start of a romantic relationship that would last the rest of his life. Robinson prefers this melodramatic arc to the tortured artist narrative:

Poly relationships or ‘kink’ on film have usually been portrayed as salacious or transgressive in a negative way and I didn’t want to do that. Narratively, I wanted to make a really accessible story that told the story of three people falling in love. I would rotate the point-of-view of the film through each of their viewpoints. I wanted the audience to root for them to be together. (qtd. in Smith)

The film flashes back to Radcliff, 1928. Olive enrolls in a psychology course with Marston. Elizabeth is there but relegated to his assistant – she could have been a professor had she not lived in a time of rampant misogyny when Harvard did not grant women PhDs. Their initial encounter is not meet-cute: Olive applies for a research position with Marston, and Elizabeth, too strong and honest for her own good, demands she not “fuck” her husband for “professional reasons.” She later apologizes over drinks and the three begin conducting research, particularly on the polygraph. Although Marston is often solely credited, the film suggests that all three were jointly responsible for the invention of the systolic blood pressure cuff, a necessary component of the lie detector, the invention and use of which becomes a key part of their love story.

In separate sequences, while hooked into the machine, Marston and Olive confess their love for Elizabeth and each other. During the first polygraph test and in a bid to intensify audiences’ emotional involvement, Marston’s confession causes Elizabeth to storm out and Olive to pursue her. Surprisingly, Olive then declares her love for Elizabeth, to the latter’s disgust, and the three have a falling out. But here we begin rooting for unconventional love. Some days later, Elizabeth changes her mind and very frankly proposes to Olive that they could all “fuck.” Olive barely has time to reply and the idea is dropped. Instead, the young student’s engagement to Brant, a staunch traditionalist, is foregrounded. Shortly thereafter, when Olive takes her own polygraph test, it is drama, sexual desire, and love that form the backdrop. In this wonderful scene, Marston asks Olive whether she’s in love with him and Elizabeth and whether she desires them sexually. Exhibiting sexual anxiety, a melodrama convention noted by Thomas Elsaesser (505), and aware that her lie will be exposed, Olive nevertheless replies in the negative. The polygraph juts up and down as every no really indicates a yes. This time
Olive rushes off in tears and Elizabeth pursues; they make-out briefly before Marston enters, and then the three have sex on the school’s stage where beforehand students rehearsed a Greek drama. The coming together and falling apart of the triad’s relationship thus relies on chance, namely, the invention of the lie detector and their confessions. Altman observes that melodramas rely on coincidence, and according to Chuck Kleinhans, the appeal of melodramas is that such coincidences are also like real life (Kleinhans 200).

Although I briefly observed that the film is best placed in a cycle alongside *Fifty Shades*, *Professor Marston* is only partly composed of sex scenes such as the above, and they are relatively tame representations. For instance, Peter Bradshaw calls this threesome “the most tasteful [i.e., boring] … sex scene in history.” It lacks any kind of continuity or realism and fails to approach the sensuality of another eroticized scene. At a “Baby Party” earlier in the film (freshmen dress up like babies and the older ones humiliate and paddle them), sorority sisters force Olive to spank a pledge while Marston and Elizabeth watch from a distance and they all get aroused (Marston and Olive did research the social rituals of sorority sisters at Tufts [Lepore 114-115]). But the onstage ménage a trois has its purpose: the triad subtly exhibits their interest in BDSM.

Bill and Betty and Olive begin a life together, expressing what Robert Lang and Elsaesser call the true subject of melodrama: middle-class families (49; 507). Despite Marston’s insistence that the world can’t stop their love, it certainly tries. The Marstons lose their jobs and struggle to find work in their fields, their child gets picked on at school, and the neighbors ostracize them. Elizabeth realizes the world is not ready for their love and ends the arrangement. Olive parts and, of course, we hope for their reunion. However, following melodrama conventions, a sacrifice is first required to ensure characters’ happiness and future (Kleinhans 201; Williams 727-728).

Towards the end of the film, Marston is diagnosed with cancer. In the hospital, he makes a final effort to right past wrongs and calls Olive and Elizabeth together, knowing that for Olive to forgive Elizabeth, their respective roles of submissive and dominant must be reversed. Marston pleads for Elizabeth to get on her knees and ask for forgiveness; when she refuses, he exclaims, “I’m dying!” She tearfully apologizes to Olive, making Marston’s looming death the necessary precondition for reunion. He dies shortly thereafter (1947), yet the two women lived together until Olive’s death, 38 years later.

So where does Wonder Woman, a.k.a. Diana Prince, fit into all this (Fig. 3)? According to the melodramatic arc, the triad’s relationship and socio-economic positions provide influence and motivation for the idea of a superhero.

When the Marstons lose their jobs, the Professor starts researching bondage and popular culture such as
pornography and comics. In one of the film’s strongest scenes, the three attend a bondage workshop. Marston and Olive volunteer and Elizabeth cries to Olive, “How could you let him do that to you?”, before fleeing. Marston gives chase and here Hall delivers one of the film’s best lines, a line that puts Marston’s feminism into question: “When are you going to stop justifying the whims of your cock with science?” Upon their return to the workshop to retrieve Olive, they find her dressed in what would later become Wonder Woman’s iconic outfit. Elizabeth’s interest in bondage takes a turn and, as a kind of antithesis to *Fifty Shades*, she binds Olive – with explicit consent (fig. 4). As Marston watches the scene, the backdrop and lighting clearly suggest that this is a revelatory moment for him, as well as the titular wonder women.

A combination of several factors – namely, his polyamorous relationship, desire for BDSM, and lack of an income – gives Marston the idea that a female superhero could make a splash with young male readers, especially given his knowledge of psychology. The film incorrectly shows Marston approaching Max Gaines of All-American Comics and pitching Superma, the Wonder Woman (in fact, after Marston’s successful interview with Olive on the positives of comics, published in *Family Circle* in October 1940, Gaines asked Marston to be his comics’ educational consultant and later, Gaines’s editor Shelton Meyer tasked Marston with creating a female superhero). But the latter half of the film does not quite explore the work of comic authorship, the industry, or the success of Marston’s character, for the creation of a superhero is merely the setting for the melodrama, all the more emphasized by the musical accompaniment. As melodrama convention dictates (Schatz 148), the love scenes and the emotionally intense ones are punctuated with saccharine strings and soft piano, scored by Tom Howe.
While the film focuses on Marston, and to a lesser degree Elizabeth, Olive is almost forgotten. Despite Robinson’s insistence in a supplementary DVD interview that the three are equally shown onscreen and Olive is the strongest character, Olive spends most the film in tears and nothing of her story is detailed. Early in the film, Olive mentions she might want to go to school for journalism, but it isn’t broached again, and the film takes no interest in what she was doing in the 1930s and 1940s except raising kids and living with the Marstons. During this period, she was mostly a stay-at-home mom, but did pen some articles for *Family Circle*.

The DVD includes two very short and mostly uninformative interview/behind-the-scenes segments with the director and cast, focusing on the production of the film and their thoughts on the unconventional love story, respectively. We do learn that *Professor Marston* was an eight-year passion project for Robinson, but few other comments are worth noting. Missing from the supplementary material is any background about Marston’s biography, the comics industry at the time, or Wonder Woman’s legacy. An interview with comic authors or editors, or even older Wonder Woman fans, could have been a valuable addition to the DVD. For example, Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette could have been perfect interview subjects, as their graphic novel *Wonder Woman: Earth One* (2016) returned the character, world and plot to Marston’s initial imaginings (Morrison, qtd. in Downey).

Despite its faults and historical inaccuracy, the film is a watershed moment for popular cinema. Representations of non-monogamous relationships usually depict the perils of cheating and affairs, the impossibility of an illicit love, or overly eccentric swingers (Bordun, “Six Films about Non-Monogamous Relationships”). Conversely, according to Anna Smith, *Professor Marston* is “The most positive depiction of polyamory… in mainstream film to date.” Forgoing aspirations towards a “biopic”, i.e., a true tale of struggle and art, Robinson directs a melodrama for the 21st century.
Works Cited


