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## Sorceress Supreme: The Feminist Superhero in 'Doctor Strange'

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The representation of women in comics is a frequently-discussed issue of late. Entire online communities have emerged for the sole purpose of analyzing and critiquing the various ways that female characters are positioned, dressed, or viewed in the name of sex appeal. The demand for more feminist superheroes is one that is ever in-creasing, as the growing number of female comic readers search for relatable or admirable heroines. Though I support this movement, it is my belief that, in the quest to change popular characters who traditionally have been overly sexualized, lesser known characters have been overlooked. These characters, though not as in the forefront, serve as excellent examples of how women in comics can be portrayed in a less sexist manner. This paper serves to present one such character: Clea, sorceress of the Dark Dimension and lover to Doctor Strange. By examining the various portrayals of Clea since her debut in 1964, I argue that Clea fits the criteria of a feminist superhero.

Doctor Strange | Clea | Feminism | Superheroines  
Women in Comics | Gender Roles

### Introduction

For more than half a century, Clea has served as the primary love interest for Doctor Strange, but her characterization presents her as much more than a woman for the Sorcerer Supreme to pine over or a damsel for him to rescue. Far from being stereotyped, Clea has served as rescuer just as often as she is rescued. She has been a student and a teacher, a revolutionary and a queen, and, through it all, has shown again and again that she is a powerful sorceress capable of matching her lover for strength and ability in any situation. I intend to highlight these admirable qualities in Clea, and in doing so establish her as a feminist superhero.

Much has been written on the subject of women in comics. Trina Robbins's *The Great Women Superheroes* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink, 1996) and Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls* (Exterminating Angel, 2009) provide general overviews of superheroines, their roles, and the ways (both positive and negative) in which they have been portrayed. Lillian S. Robinson's *Wonder Women: feminisms and superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004) provides detailed analyses of specific superheroines, citing in particular their individual relationships with feminism and feminist themes.<sup>1</sup> *Heroines of Comic Books and Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), the collection edited by Maja Bajac-Carter, Norma Jones, and Bob Batchelor, also contains a

number of excellent essays exploring the subject.<sup>2</sup> Outside of traditional texts, entire online communities have emerged dedicated to the discussion of female characters and their portrayals in comics (and media in general). Blogs such as Eschergirls, Repair Her Armor, and the Hawkeye Initiative have amassed considerable followings in their quest to highlight the trend of hyper-sexualization in female comic characters.<sup>3</sup> Even texts focused more generally on the comic medium, such as Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch* (New York: Continuum, 2004) and Gerard Jones's *Killing Monsters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), make a point to highlight the discrepancy between the portrayals of male and female characters. The conclusion, across all of these works, is largely the same: that among superheroes, women who are self-reliant, powerful, and not overly sexualized are very much in the minority.

Regardless of whether or not it is the result of these (and other similar) discussions, there appears to be a definite movement in the direction of more relatable and/or admirable women in comics. Between 2013 and 2014, Marvel debuted a number of titles centered on female heroes or female teams, and *Ms. Marvel* in particular was well received.<sup>4</sup> DC has announced a reboot of *Batgirl*, and the design (revealed in July of 2014 and premiering on paper in October of the same year) has received praise for its practicality and basis in reality. It marks a movement away from the vacuum-sealed spandex look, and presents Barbara Gordon in clothing that could very easily be procured by the daughter of a police commissioner. Likewise, *My So-Called Secret Identity*, a largely fan-funded project by Will Brooker, Suze Shore, and Sarah Zaidan, has received similar accolades for the characterization of its protagonist, Cat, a college student whose only remarkable attributes are an analytical mind and an eye for detail. Brooker describes the project as the result

<sup>1</sup> The bulk of this text is devoted to Wonder Woman, though Robinson also provides in-depth discussions of She-Hulk, the Invisible Woman, and several other characters.

<sup>2</sup> This includes two examinations of Marvel superheroines, one by T. Kieth Edmunds (discussing the lack of an iconic heroine) and one by Joseph Darowski (critiquing the limited roles of the early heroines), both of which are quoted later in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The Eschergirls community (<http://eschergirls.tumblr.com>) has even given names to the various contortionist-worthy positions in which female characters can be found throughout comics. Repair Her Armor (<http://repair-her-armor.tumblr.com>) highlights the absurd outfits that female characters are shown wearing in the name of sex appeal, while the Hawkeye Initiative (<http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com>) opts to showcase the discrepancy between the sexes by replacing the female characters in comics with male ones, usually the Avengers' archer. These three communities, despite their different approaches, have a singular goal in mind: to highlight the inequality between the portrayal of men and women in comics in an effort to spark change.

<sup>4</sup> Etelka Lehoczy's review of *Ms. Marvel* for NPR (which also mentions Marvel's female-centered titles and the *Batgirl* reboot) is one of many praising the debut of Kamala Khan, and can be found here: <http://www.npr.org/2014/10/16/354592028/shazam-rebooted-comic-heroine-is-a-marvel>

of his decision “to stop criticising mainstream comics for their representation of women, and show how it could be done differently; how it could be done better.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this trend, it is generally agreed that such instances are mere drops into the ocean, since for every Batgirl and Cat there are a dozen Power Girls and Emma Frosts, women who are overtly sexualized as an inherent part of their characterization. Regardless, a movement is certainly being made, and that, in itself, is to be commended.

In spite of these examinations of the subject, the focus of the discussion tends, unsurprisingly, to be on more prominent members of the superheroine community: Wonder Woman, Batgirl, She-Hulk, the Invisible Woman, etc. Even those studies which focus solely on Marvel’s superheroines rarely extend beyond discussing those women found on the rosters of the *Avengers*, the *X-Men*, and the *Fantastic Four*. Several discussions go so far as to include popular characters like Xena and Buffy, female action heroes who (though present in comics) originated outside the medium. As a result, many less prominent characters have been neglected. In examining Clea, I hope to present one of these overlooked characters, one that is deserving of recognition for the positive ways in which she has been portrayed. In order to establish her as a feminist superhero, I will show that Clea is not stereotyped into either a “good girl” or “bad girl”<sup>6</sup> role, thereby placing her outside of traditional patriarchal gender roles — that is, notions of what is masculine and what is feminine as defined by a male-dominated society.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, I aim to show that Clea manages to accomplish this without sacrificing her autonomy or becoming a sexualized object.<sup>8</sup>

My discussion of Clea will focus on a qualitative analysis of both the text and the images across her appearances since 1964. This differs from the approach taken by Bradford W. Wright, whose *Comic Book Nation* places an emphasis on narrative over image. While this approach serves Wright’s intention of discussing comics as representations of culture, for the purpose of my analysis I will be considering image and text as equally important. Like most of the characters

that Marvel debuted in the early 1960s, Clea was a product of the ‘Marvel method,’ a process that shifted a portion of the writing, plotting, and even character conception to the artist. In this case, the artist in question is Steve Ditko, who is credited as co-creator of many of the *Doctor Strange* characters, including (among others) Strange, Clea, Wong, and Dormammu. Ditko’s role in Clea’s creation, as well as the importance of the ways in which women in comics are drawn,<sup>9</sup> make consideration of the image crucial to my establishment of Clea as a feminist superhero.

Additionally, the methodology employed by Will Brooker in *Batman Unmasked* and by the various contributors to Pearson and Uricchio’s *The Many Lives of the Batman*, wherein the Caped Crusader is discussed and analyzed not only as a heroic character, but as a cultural icon, cannot be employed when discussing Clea. As a supporting character in one of Marvel’s less popular titles, Clea lacks the cultural resonance possessed by figures such as Batman, Wonder Woman, or Captain America. Her role, at least at the time of my writing, is confined to her appearance within the comics.

### The Quest for the Feminist Superhero

The relationship between feminism and superhero comics has its roots in the 1940s, not long after the birth of the superhero comic itself. With the introduction of Wonder Woman in 1941, creator William Moulton Marston gave the world its first feminist superhero, and wrote the adventures of the Amazon princess so that they placed a heavy emphasis on themes of female independence and empowerment. Unfortunately, this trend did not last, as the emphasis on female empowerment faded in the years following Marston’s death in 1947.<sup>10</sup> This likely was the result of a popular assumption: that the comic book — and, perhaps more than other variants of the medium, the superhero comic — attracts an audience that is predominately male, sometimes estimated to be, according to Edmunds, “between 80 and 95 percent” (212).<sup>11</sup> With the notable exception of Wonder Woman, the presentation of women in both Golden and Silver Age comics for the most part reflects this assumption.

<sup>5</sup> “About Cat.” Accessed August 20, 2014.

<http://www.mysocalledsecretidentity.com/aboutcat>

<sup>6</sup> This dichotomy is often cited in discussions of women’s roles, and appears in a number of writings both on feminism and psychology. The duality is defined and discussed in detail in *The Four Boxes of Gendered Sexuality*, by Besty Crane and Jesse Crane-Seeber. The paper is readily accessible on academia.edu

([https://www.academia.edu/2550403/Four\\_Boxes\\_of\\_Gendered\\_Sexuality\\_Good\\_Girl\\_vs\\_Bad\\_Girl\\_and\\_Tough\\_Guy\\_vs\\_Sweet\\_Guy](https://www.academia.edu/2550403/Four_Boxes_of_Gendered_Sexuality_Good_Girl_vs_Bad_Girl_and_Tough_Guy_vs_Sweet_Guy)).

<sup>7</sup> Numerous texts have discussed traditional gender roles and the terminology associated with feminist criticism, but I find Lois Tyson’s definitions in *Critical Theory Today* (New York: Routledge, 2006) to be both thorough and effectively succinct.

<sup>8</sup> See Martha Nussbaum’s “Objectification,” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1995) for a thorough discussion of the ways in which men and woman are objectified.

<sup>9</sup> Trina Robbins’s *The Great Women Superheroes* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink, 1996) and Mike Madrid’s *The Supergirls* (Exterminating Angel, 2009) both make mention of this necessity.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson’s *Wonder Women: feminisms and superheroes* charts the history of Wonder Woman in detail and notes the character’s relationship with feminism.

<sup>11</sup> On her Women in Refrigerators website (<http://lby3.com/wir/>), Gail Simone notes that, when she discussed this assumption with comic creators, none of them seemed to have so much as an estimate of what percentage of readers were female. Robbins describes this as a “circular logic” in *The Great Women Superheroes*, pointing out that, by assuming comics had no female readers, creators continued to make comics tailored to a male audience, thereby further alienating any female readers they might have had.

Joseph Darowski, in his analysis of early Marvel super-heroines, notes:

They were often damsels in distress, and they were rarely involved in the main action of the comic books. Much more often than their male counterparts, they would be captured or faint in the midst of battle. While men on the team usually had clear identifying characteristics (the scientist, the leader, the hothead, the goofball, etc.), the women were all predominantly characterized through their romantic relationships (209).

Despite the presence of a woman on the original rosters of the *Avengers*, the *X-Men*, and the *Fantastic Four* (Wasp, Marvel Girl, and the Invisible Girl, respectively), these super-powered women are still presented as weak, overly emotional creatures in constant need of rescuing, and serve primarily as romantic interests for one of their teammates (Ant-Man, Cyclops, and Mr. Fantastic). In this regard, the women of Marvel comics in the 1960s fall very much in line with traditional gender roles, which, as described by Tyson, “cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (85).

As superhero comics evolved and developed into the 80s and 90s, the female characters developed as well — most noticeably in their physical proportions.<sup>12</sup> While this period saw an increase in the overall presence of powerful women in active roles, this increase was marked by hypersexualization. More often than not, superheroines were presented in “skimpy, highly sexualized outfits, substituting their position of love interest for another character with that of being a love interest for the reader” (Edmunds 212). In addition to the outfits themselves, these women were frequently portrayed in highly sexualized poses, bending or moving or shown from angles that highlight, accentuate, or otherwise draw attention to their sexual attributes. As Martha Nussbaum notes, such a portrayal divorces the actor from the action, instead sending a message of, “whatever else this woman is and does, for us she is an object for sexual enjoyment” (283). Presenting superheroines as sexual objects directly contradicts (and even undermines) the apparent advancement in the portrayals of them as more autonomous, central or active characters. Furthermore, a shift in portrayal from submissive, emotional, and vulnerable to aggressive, violent, and sexually provocative (if not outrightly promiscuous) is not a shift towards feminism, but

rather a movement from one end of the patriarchal spectrum to the other — from good girl to bad girl.<sup>13</sup> This dichotomy, which is known by various names, is common throughout literature, as it serves to restrict the roles of women to being defined in relation to traditional gender roles.<sup>14</sup> Women either follow all of the norms of the patriarchy, and are good, or they deny them all, and are bad.

A feminist superhero, then, is not simply one that defies traditional gender roles, but one who does so without the extreme ferocity and, more importantly, without the overt sexualization that plagues the portrayals of so many superheroines even into today. Even Wonder Woman, a character whose early days, as mentioned, were frequently characterized by themes of female empowerment and independence, fell victim to this trend in the years following the death of her creator—a period that Lillian S. Robinson terms the character’s “decline” (65). A feminist superhero is one who does not require constant rescuing, who has identifying characteristics beyond those of love interest. The feminist superhero is strong and capable, and is presented as being in control of the power that she wields. Edmunds notes that a disturbing trend in the empowerment of female superheroes is that they “are often shown to be unable to wield [their powers] responsibly and eventually cause great damage to those they love most” (Edmunds 211). Super-heroines such as Phoenix or the Scarlet Witch are portrayed as mentally unstable, and unable to cope with the prodigious powers that they wield, a problem that does not seem to be an issue (or at least considerably less of an issue) for their male counterparts. In order to be termed a feminist character, a superheroine must incorporate all of these traits.

### Clea and Feminism

It would be admirable to see that Clea has been such a character since she debuted in 1964, but, unfortunately, this is not the case. Clea first appeared in *Strange Tales* no. 126 [November 1964] as an unnamed white-haired woman in the court of Dormammu, the fearsome ruler of the Dark Dimension who serves as Strange’s primary foe. She is immediately entranced by Strange, and, like a maiden out of Arthurian myth, makes it her duty to inform him of the danger he courts by challenging the lord of the Dark Dimension. When it becomes clear that Strange has no interest in heeding her warning, she works secretly to undermine Dormammu’s schemes against the Sorcerer Supreme. Despite the bravery inherent in her rebellious efforts, Clea’s motivation for these actions is not a resistance to Dormammu’s tyranny, but rather her infatuation with Strange. She is, predictably, discovered by the Dread One and

<sup>12</sup> Robbins notes this trend in an interview by Michael D. Reid, “Why Superpowers Increase Breast Size,” *Times Colonist*, February 5, 2013 <http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/movies/why-superpowers-increase-breast-size-interview-with-a-comic-legend-1.67635>

<sup>13</sup> Robbins discusses the emergence of “good girl” and “bad girl” comics in *The Great Women Superheroes*

<sup>14</sup> The prevalence of this trend is highlighted by the discussion of feminist literary criticism found in Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today*.



captured, but while she is Dormammu's helpless captive, Clea reflects that she "would aid [Strange] again and again"<sup>15</sup> if given the chance, despite the dangers to herself. In her first several appearances, Clea is given little characterization beyond this. Stan Lee, who was the writer for all of these issues, presents her as a nameless (Clea was not named until July of 1966, almost two years after her first appearance) love interest for Strange, a mysterious and beautiful woman infatuated by the "Master of the Mystic Arts" to the point that she is willing to risk her life to help him.

However, in the subsequent years, Clea's relationship with Doctor Strange develops beyond that of a simple love interest. After being freed from the Realm Unknown and the clutches of Dormammu, Clea begins her life as an exile on Earth. It is from hereon after — written primarily by Roger Stern or by husband and wife team Roy and Dann Thomas — that Clea's romantic relationship with Strange further develops, and she eventually becomes a student in the ways of magic under the Sorcerer Supreme.

The fact that Clea occupies two roles in Strange's life complicates their relationship, and serves as a frequent source of tension and conflict during this period. On several occasions, she reflects on the nature of her place as both his lover and his student, and on each occasion feels that her place as one is hindered by her place as the other. Strange also seems unable to reconcile Clea's dual role in his life. He has other lovers throughout his many appearances over the years, and other disciples, and tends to shield the former while pulling the latter headlong into danger beside him. Though Clea shifts between her two roles, Strange tends to favor whichever role will keep Clea from harm in a given situation, to the point where she feels needlessly coddled by him. "How can a man so wise be so blind?"<sup>16</sup> Clea wonders as she's told once again not to accompany her lover to battle. Because of her place as his lover, Strange is often incapable of seeing Clea for the powerful sorceress that she becomes under his tutelage.

This is not to say that Strange views himself as superior to Clea. Though she is officially his student, the Sorcerer Supreme readily acknowledges that Clea is his equal. Her capture by Mordo forces Strange to acknowledge, for the first time, that he and Clea share a "mystic link" which has formed as a result of their "unique relationship." Strange realizes that "Clea has become something quite different than a lover," and that her prodigious magical abilities have made her "the Yin to [his] Yang."<sup>17</sup> Despite the fact that Strange's default reaction seems to be to act as the chivalrous knight and protect his lady from harm, he is fully aware that Clea is his

equal, and, furthermore, that their different powers make them two complementary halves of a single, very powerful whole. Consequently, he is not afraid to step down and follow her lead, as seen most notably in the arc collected in *Into the Dark Dimension*, which chronicles the rebellion against Umar<sup>18</sup> and culminates with Clea's usurpation of her mother as regent of the Dark Dimension. Strange — who is unwittingly drawn into the conflict because Umar mistakenly believes him to be the rebellion's orchestrator — accepts Clea's place as leader of the revolution, and, in a reversal of what he has made their usual roles, follows her commands without objection. When Orini<sup>19</sup> vows that "no foreign sorcerer will topple Umar from the azure throne,"<sup>20</sup> Strange replies that he has no intention of doing so. He acknowledges that, despite Umar dragging him into the fight, it is still Clea's to lead. He takes no part in Clea's infiltration of Umar's palace or the final confrontation with the tyrant queen. Though Strange plays an instrumental part in the rebellion, it is Clea and Clea alone who defeats Umar.

### Clea vs. the Enchantress

Of particular significance is the two-part battle with the Enchantress and Arkon featured in *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* nos. 12 [December 1989] and 13 [January 1990]. In these issues, not only is the equality between Strange and Clea most openly expressed, but it also serves to incorporate Amora the Enchantress (ordinarily an enemy of Thor), who serves as an excellent contrast to Clea by presenting the classic archetype of the Femme Fatale. This archetype, that of a beautiful but treacherous woman who uses her wiles to lead men to destruction, is one that has existed for centuries, based in the assumption that a woman's sexuality can be dangerous and destructive.

The Femme Fatale is a form of the aforementioned "bad girl" stereotype, perhaps the most dangerous form, as she represents not only a woman who is bold and sexually promiscuous, but one who willfully uses that promiscuity to corrupt and ruin men. The Enchantress is seen using a combination of her beauty, cunning, and magical ability — usually in the form of hypnotic kisses — to manipulate Doctor Strange in an effort to lead him to his doom.

<sup>15</sup> Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Strange Tales* vol. 1 no. 139 (New York: Marvel Comics), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Stern and Tom Sutton, *Doctor Strange*, vol. 2, no. 29 (New York: Marvel Comics), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Stern and Marshall Rogers, *Doctor Strange*, vol. 2, no. 50 (New York: Marvel Comics), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Dormammu's sister and Clea's mother, who vies against her brother and daughter for control over the Dark Dimension

<sup>19</sup> Clea's father, fiercely loyal to Umar

<sup>20</sup> Roger Stern et al, *Doctor Strange: Into the Dark Dimension*, (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011) 98.

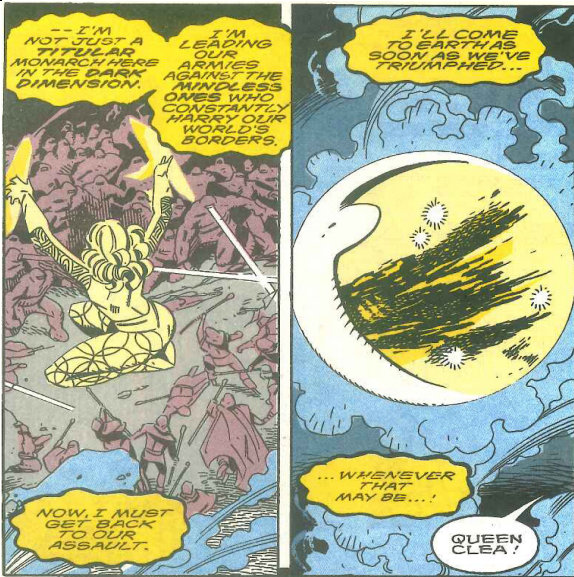


Figure 1 Clea reminds Rintrah that she cannot be bothered with trivial matters. *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*, vol. 1 no. 12 [December 1989], 10. Written by Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, penciled and inked by Jackson Guice

When Rintrah<sup>21</sup> grows concerned for his master, he begs Clea to intercede. The queen of the Dark Dimension is quick to point out that a simple entrancement spell is nothing to bother her about. "You want me to rush over and cure him of his infatuation?" Clea cries in disbelief. "It sounds like something Stephen can — should — take care of for himself."<sup>22</sup> She further reminds Rintrah that she has an entire dimension to rule and protect, and that her constant struggle against the Mindless Ones is more important than dropping everything to run to help Stephen overcome so trivial a matter. Of course, the Enchantress proves to indeed be the formidable danger that Rintrah suspects, and when the combined powers of the Enchantress and the Executioner prove too great for the Sorcerer Supreme, it is the queen of the Dark Dimension who comes to his aid with a bolt of bedevilment and a cheery "Hello, Stephen. Can't leave you on your own for a minute, can I?"<sup>23</sup>

The Enchantress, as mentioned, fills the role of *Femme Fatale* in this story, and as a result serves as a sharp contrast to Clea. Faced with a wicked witch worthy of a fairy tale, Clea proves that she is "no storybook princess." "I'm [...] the rightful queen of the Dark Dimension!" she proclaims. "My mother is Umar the Unrelenting — her brother is Dormammu the Dreaded One — and, through the Flames of Regency which seethe and simmer always about my head—their

power is likewise mine!"<sup>24</sup> Clea dispatches the Enchantress within a matter of moments, and though Strange initially believes that "Clea merely came along in time to tip the balance, because Amora was over-extended," he remembers that Clea has been personally leading a crusade against the Mindless Ones, and reminds himself that Clea "is no longer anybody's disciple."<sup>25</sup> Clea is a powerful sorceress in her own right, and unlike Strange's other students, she has become capable of standing on equal magical footing with him.



Figure 2 *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* vol. 1, no. 13, cover art by Jackson Guice

Though the cover for *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* no. 13 shows a chained and submissive Clea with Arkon's arm around her, and proclaims that "TO THE VICTOR GOES THE SPOILS... THE MYSTIC CLEA," the story within does not reflect this. Though she is briefly held as Arkon's captive, Clea is never in chains, and though she spends the issue dressed like a figure from the cover of a romance novel, her actions make it very clear that she will not be "the traditional helpless female, to be carted around by some gorilla."<sup>26</sup> While Doctor Strange and Arkon engage in a brutal, barbaric fistfight over Clea, she uses her wits and her magic to save Strange's life, and with little more than a snap of her fingers bests Arkon and returns him to his homeland. Once Arkon is defeated, Clea sees her role in the victory as so great she feels the need to reassure her beloved of his abilities. "In

<sup>21</sup> One of Strange's other apprentices, a bull-like creature from another dimension. He is a frequent source of comic relief, characterized as naïve and clumsy.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Thomas, Dann Thomas, and Jackson Guice, *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*, vol. 1, no. 12 (New York: Marvel Comics), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas, Thomas, and Guice, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, Thomas, and Guice, 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Roy Thomas, Dann Thomas, and Jackson Guice, *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*, vol. 1, no. 13 (New York: Marvel Comics), 21.



your own way, you're every bit as strong as I am" she reminds Doctor Strange, "so you shouldn't feel humiliated or unmanly just because I've helped you out once — or even twice."<sup>27</sup> While Strange appreciates Clea "trying to spare [his] delicate male feelings," he reaffirms that "whether I save you, or you save me, in a particular situation is really immaterial."<sup>28</sup> The two, as Strange himself has said, are Yin and Yang, equal and complementary parts of a whole. Strange does not see himself as a man being saved by a woman, but rather as being aided by a person he sees as his peer and counterpart.

This same issue also serves to highlight an interesting facet of Clea's character. As a native denizen of the Dark Dimension, Clea is an outsider in a world where "the man usually protects the woman"<sup>29</sup> This otherness<sup>30</sup> allows her, perhaps better than anyone, to see "that the universe as a whole is masculine; it is men who have shaped it and rule it and who still today dominate it," and to subsequently defy this dominance (de Beauvoir 639). Furthermore, Clea's status as outsider also permits her a convenient vehicle for breaking free from the good girl/bad girl duality that is so prevalent in a world that she describes as backward and primitive. Though she is a morally good character and serves as the love interest for the hero of the series, this does not automatically affix Clea with the label of 'good girl,' a role to which "are attributed all the virtues associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity: she's modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing."<sup>31</sup>

Modest and unassuming, Clea certainly is not, considering how frequently she voices the fact that she is one of the Faltine as well as being the rightful ruler of the Dark Dimension, regardless of whether or not she holds the throne at the precise moment of her declaration. Clea wields prodigious magical power, and will not hide that power for the sake of feminine modesty. She can certainly be considered self-sacrificing, but this is a quality that be ascribed to all superheroes, as heroes by their very nature are willing to sacrifice for the greater good. As queen of the Dark Dimension, Clea makes it very clear that her duty is to her people. Despite the love that they bear for each other, both Clea and Strange have duties in their respective dimensions that frequently keep them apart.

Clea is decidedly independent, and though as a lover and wife she is more than willing to aid Strange when he requires

help, she refuses to be subservient to him. The on-again, off-again nature of their relationship is a result of a fundamental incompatibility between them: Strange's instinct to protect and safeguard the woman he loves is continually at odds with Clea's refusal to be treated as weak or naïve. Though she tolerates this in Strange, accepting it as part of the nature of the man she loves, Clea's patience has its limit. She refuses to sit by and let Strange treat her like a child. "I'm a sorceress — not some child you have to tuck into bed," she reminds Strange when he puts her into an enchanted sleep so that he "can run away and play hero with Rintrah and Topaz."<sup>32</sup>

This is a dynamic that has endured across various authors, and had become an inherent part of the relationship between Clea and Strange. The 2013-2014 run of *Fearless Defenders* (cancelled after only twelve issues) exaggerates this quality in Strange, and presents him as a man who, for all his knowledge of the multiverse, is rather oblivious. When the Defenders' love interests are sitting in a bar discussing their views on the team, Strange expresses his disappointment and sadness that Clea, who he describes as "my greatest disciple. My closest friend...my lover...my wife"<sup>33</sup> could forget him with such apparent ease.



Figure 3 Strange does not understand how Clea could forget him. *The Fearless Defenders*, vol. 2 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014), 50. Written by Cullen Bunn, art by Will Sliny, color by Veronica Gandini.

A flashback sequence during his musing shows the reader the truth: that Clea, upon returning from the Dark

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, Thomas, and Guice, 23.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Clea's status as Other is twofold. She is other in the sense that woman is Other, as Simone de Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 2011), but she also functions as Other in the sense that she is not of the same dimension as Strange and Earth, making her even farther removed from the identity of humanity as Self than alien superheroes such as Superman.

<sup>31</sup> Tyson, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Roy Thomas, Dann Thomas, and Chris Marrinan, *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*, vol. 1, no. 32 (New York: Marvel Comics), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Cullen Bunn, Stephanie Hans, and Will Sliny, *The Fearless Defenders*, vol. 2 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014), 50.

Dimension, attempts to drop in on her husband unannounced. Peering through a window, she sees Strange sitting on a throne, grinning like a fool as three women stand around him in various skimpy or skintight outfits. More context than this is not given, as Clea departs from the Sanctum Sanctorum in tears.

Later, as the two of them combat Sylvie Lushton, the second Enchantress, Clea greets her husband with “It is good to see you again, Stephen. I want a divorce.”<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, Clea’s declaration is never addressed, as she apparently vanishes after the battle (to reappear almost thirty pages later) and, other than a brief conversation with Valkyrie in the battle’s aftermath, Strange does not appear again. It will be interesting to see how their relationship progresses from here.

### The Magical Women of *Doctor Strange*

It must be noted, however, that this portrayal of women seems to be, for the most part, restricted to Clea, and is not a characteristic of the *Doctor Strange* title as a whole. To highlight this discrepancy, I will provide brief examinations of two other magically empowered women within the series: Umar the Unrelenting, who serves as one of Strange’s most fearsome enemies, and the empath healer Topaz, a frequent ally of his during the 1980s.

Umar is the mother of Clea and the sister of the Dread Dormammu. Like the other members of her family, she possesses the powers of the Faltine and competes for sovereignty over the Dark Dimension. Her very first appearance sees her intimidating the Mindless Ones into obedience and revealing that she was tricked into banishment because the Dread One feared her might.<sup>35</sup> This dramatic entrance (in *Strange Tales* no. 150) comes on the heels of Kaluu’s defeat by the combined might of Strange and the Ancient One, and just a few short issues after Dormammu’s cataclysmic battle with Infinity. Having witnessed these dramatic battles, readers are promised that “the infamous deeds of the Dread Dormammu shall pall beside those of ... Umar the Unrelenting!” (Lee et al 98).

Unfortunately, Strange’s first female adversary does not entirely live up to her promise. In one of her early appearances, Umar decides that she “shall crush the accursed [Doctor Strange] as only a woman can — with the matchless weapons of cunning — and overwhelming guile!” (116). Despite the fact that “the power of Umar is beyond all measure,” Dormammu’s fearsome sister opts to destroy Strange by deception and trickery rather than force. Such a tactic is not employed by any of the male enemies that Strange faces prior to Umar’s debut, and Umar’s speech clearly tells the reader that she is only doing so because she

is female. While Dormammu, Baron Mordo, and Strange’s other foes relentlessly seek to destroy him with some powerful incantation or forgotten magical relic, Umar is more often shown manipulating or influencing others into doing her bidding.

By contrast, Clea uses trickery only occasionally, and always in conjunction with potent magic, while Strange frequently resorts to deception and manipulation in battle, often when he finds himself squaring off against a powerful entity who would crush him in fair combat. Umar is also presented as being incredibly vain, a trait that is never ascribed to Clea. When Veritas, the spirit of truth, shows her a corpse-like yellow face, Umar recoils, crying “‘tis the one thing I fear [...] the awesome sight of Umar, as I really exist,” implying that her beautiful, youthful appearance is an illusion perpetuated by her magic (142). This sight is so upsetting to Umar that she concedes defeat to Strange, even though she held him as her helpless prisoner only moments before.

Though she professes and demonstrates considerable power, Umar is undermined by vanity and a reliance on the traditionally feminine tactics of manipulation and deception. Unlike Clea’s short-lived characterization as a damsel in distress, which faded in the years following Stan Lee’s term as the series writer,<sup>36</sup> this characterization of Umar has continued into the present. Umar’s magical abilities, vanity, and antagonist relationship with both her daughter (Clea) and her daughter’s suitor (Strange) make her reminiscent of Snow White’s evil queen. The queen, along with Sleeping Beauty’s wicked fairy, Cinderella’s stepmother, and numerous others belong to the pantheon of fairy tale bad girls, characters outside the patriarchal gender norms who are portrayed as monstrous and whose sole purpose is to menace the good girls of their respective tales (Tyson 89).

By contrast, the empath healer Topaz uses her magical abilities for good. Created by Marv Wolfman and Mike Ploog and originally appearing as an ally of Werewolf by Night, Topaz was brought into the *Doctor Strange* title in 1986, where she is shown escaping from Hades in a rocky demonic form, a shape from which she is saved by the Sorcerer Supreme. Following this rescue, it is revealed that Topaz’s time in hell has robbed her of the half of her soul containing her empath abilities. As her time in the Sanctum Sanctorum progresses, it is further revealed that this missing portion of her soul also contains her self-restraint, and, as a result, the empath frequently “swings from one feeling to another” (Stern and Buscema 3).

This makes Topaz a caricature of the patriarchal woman, unable to control her feelings and constantly shifting from one extreme to the other in melodramatic displays of emotion. This could easily be read as a satire on the damsel in distress that was common in Marvel’s 1960s comics — Wong describes Topaz as “a caricature of everything I find —

<sup>34</sup> Bunn, Sliney, and Hans, 59.

<sup>35</sup> Stan Lee et al, *Marvel Masterworks: Doctor Strange*, vol. 2 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2013), 98.

<sup>36</sup> The last issue of *Strange Tales* written by Lee was in June 1967. Steve Ditko’s final issue was a year earlier, in July 1966.



difficult — in Western women<sup>37</sup> — but the restoration of Topaz's soul does not do a great deal to change her.

The span of a few short minutes in *Strange Tales* vol. 2 no. 1 sees her shifting from calm sympathy (her default once her soul is restored) to agony to anger, only to flip between sympathy and anger until she finally settles on cold wisdom. Strange and Clea, the other participants in this conversation, admittedly also express a range of emotions, but do so with considerably fewer dramatic outbursts.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to these dramatic emotional changes, Topaz is also more heavily sexualized than any of the other recurring female characters within the *Doctor Strange* title. In her appearances in *Doctor Strange* and *Strange Tales* throughout the 80s, her standard attire is a simple white dress, cut low enough to show cleavage, and sporting a skirt that perpetually shifts, depending on the panel, between opaque, semi-transparent, and completely transparent (the issue cited above being the worst offender in this regard). Additionally, Topaz is frequently presented from angles or shown in positions that highlight or accentuate her sexuality and make her an object to be ogled.

Issue no. 6 of *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* [August 1989]<sup>39</sup> even goes so far as to give the empath a wholly unnecessary dressing scene. Though the scene is played for comedy, with the alien Rintrah befuddled and embarrassed, the use of perspective and the positions Topaz is drawn in are clearly intended to sexualize and objectify her. Based on her personality, Topaz is one of the patriarchal good girls: she is caring, nurturing, and emotional, and — unlike Clea and Umar — her magical abilities are protective and restorative only, without any harmful or offensive properties. Her over-sexualization, though contradictory to the notion of the good girl as innocent and demure, is part of the trend that Edmunds described, where comic book superheroines function not as love interests for other characters, but as love interests (or, perhaps more accurately, objects of lust) for the reader.

By contrast, Clea is never sexualized. Her usual costume, a pink tunic and ring-patterned tights, has remained virtually unchanged across fifty years, and is even comparable to Strange's usual blue tunic with black tights. The occasions when Clea is shown in a state of undress are almost always when she has been roused from sleep, and in these moments Strange is always beside her in a similar condition. Rarely (if ever) does the artwork prompt the reader to stare at Clea in the ways that it moves Topaz.



Figure 4 The sight of Topaz dressing might mean nothing to Rintrah, but it certainly means something to human readers. *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*, vol. 1, no. 6. Written by Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, penciled by Jackson Guice, inked by Jose Marzan Jr.

Though she is not heavily sexualized, neither is Clea portrayed as the perfect and chaste “good girl.” Even before they are married, it is clearly implied that she and Strange are sleeping together, as the series presents several scenes of them just risen from bed or even sleeping in each other's arms. More telling than these, however, is when Clea becomes queen of the Dark Dimension, and asks Strange to remain as her consort. The Sorcerer Supreme protests that Clea does not need his wisdom or his mystical might, and Clea's response is to kiss Strange and remind him “That is not all you have to give, Dr. Strange.”<sup>40</sup>

She wants him to remain not as a political, intellectual, or magical asset, but as her lover and companion. Just as with her regal status and her magical abilities, Clea makes no attempt to hide her sexuality. The idea of traditional patriarchal femininity is, as mentioned earlier, completely foreign to Clea. Though she does make some concessions, and adapts to human society when on Earth, such as refraining from flight or other public demonstrations of magic, Clea makes no attempt to adapt to the patriarchal aspects of her lover's universe. This could easily be played for comedy,

<sup>37</sup> Peter B. Gillis and Chris Warner, *Doctor Strange*, vol. 2, no. 79 (New York: Marvel Comics), 6.

<sup>38</sup> Gillis, Peter B. et al, *Doctor Strange: Strange Tales*, (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011) 5-12.

<sup>39</sup> Roy Thomas and Dann Thomas, Jackson Guice, and Jose Marzan, Jr. *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*, vol. 1 no. 6 (New York, Marvel Comics)

<sup>40</sup> Stern et al, *Into the Dark Dimension*, 150.



as a fish-out-of-water situation (as is often used with Rintrah), but it is not. Never is Clea painted as the alien sorceress whose inability to adapt to our world is a source of amusement. Clea is never mocked or ridiculed for her independence or refusal to be treated like a helpless damsel, and her magical abilities are frequently presented as being as awe-inspiring and potent as the Sorcerer Supreme's. Those who do not or cannot see this power — such as Arkon, Amora, Umar, and even the Dread Dormammu himself — often find themselves the subjects of a demonstration.

### Conclusion: Sorceress Supreme

As described above, Clea is a character deserving of recognition. A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the discussion of other female superheroes, but since her debut in 1964, Clea has been overlooked. She incorporates elements from both sides of the patriarchal male/female duality as well as the good girl/bad girl duality. She is powerful, intelligent, and self-reliant, all while simultaneously fulfilling the traditionally feminine role of love interest and remaining a loving, self-sacrificing, and faithful (it is worth noting that it is always Clea who breaks off their relationship, and always as a reaction to something Strange has done) lover and wife. She feels no need to hide her abilities, her status, or her sexuality to present a traditionally feminine persona.

In addition to her defiance of traditional gender roles, Clea also defies the trends that superheroines have been subject to over the years. She is presented as having an identity independent of her relationship with Strange as the rightful ruler of the Dark Dimension, a role that even Strange, with his desire to protect and shield Clea, acknowledges her as more than capable of fulfilling without any assistance from him. It can be argued, even though she was initially presented as Strange's love interest, that Clea's role as ruler of the Dark Dimension has become her primary one, as she does not hesitate to leave Earth (and Strange) if her own realm needs her.

Clea wields a considerable amount of magical power, enough that she is capable of rescuing the man known as the Sorcerer Supreme, and yet is never shown as being unable to control that power. Even when she bears the Flames of Regency, which are stated to increase her abilities, she acts with confidence and pride, perhaps to an even greater degree than when she does not hold the Azure Throne. Her standard outfit is conservative and practical, and even when other women around her are shown in revealing clothing or provocative positions, Clea does not fall victim to the trend of over-sexualization.

Yet, despite her positive portrayal over the last several decades, Clea remains in a supporting role, whether as a counterpart to Doctor Strange or as a member of the Defenders. The premiere of a series featuring Clea in a more

central role — “Clea of the Dark Dimension,” perhaps — would be a powerful addition to the increased number of female-centered titles, provided the characterization of her that I have described here remains. Establishing Clea as a central character would not only further challenge the idea of superhero comics as a realm of masculinity, but building up extant characters like Clea, rather than fighting to change less feminist characters, may be the best way to effect change. Characters such as Clea help to show not only how the portrayal of women can be done better, but also show that this better portrayal is already present in well-established aspects of the world of comics.

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