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# **A Vindication of the Rights of Natasha Romanoff**

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Abstract: The ‘Black Widow controversy’ arose after the film release of Joss Whedon’s *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) in response to the way the film seems to restrict the development of Scarlett Johansson’s character, Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), to the sexist themes of romance and motherhood. In one particular scene, the character herself espouses a regressive ideology of female virtue, nature, and identity when she refers to her sterilized body as “monstrous.” Using the writings of early and contemporary feminist theorists, I argue against the claims that Natasha’s character arc in *Ultron* is anti-feminist and that it detracts from her reputation as a strong female character. I conclude that the Black Widow controversy resulted from audiences perceiving and interpreting Natasha’s role and storyline based on their own problematic expectations, stereotypes, and preconceived notions about female superheroes and powerful female characters, rather than based on how she was depicted in the film.

Keywords: Black Widow Controversy; Age of Ultron; Strong Female Character; Superheroes and Gender; Monstrousness

After the film release of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Joss Whedon's sequel to his 2012 blockbuster, *The Avengers*, audiences immediately took to online forums and social media sites to express their displeasure with the treatment of Scarlett Johansson's character, Natasha Romanoff, codename Black Widow. Before *Ultron*, Natasha was considered by many to be a strong female character, which is a rare — and apparently unsustainable — phenomenon in a franchise and genre dominated by men. According to numerous outraged fans and feminists on the Internet, the film renders Natasha two-dimensional and weak when she reveals to Bruce Banner (the Hulk) that she cannot have children and then suggests that this makes her a “monster.” Many were left wondering how and why Whedon, a celebrated feminist, would “say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways” (De Pizan, *City of Ladies* 211), to quote another celebrated feminist. However, closer consideration of Natasha's backstory and its place in the larger context of the film reveals that in foregrounding the character's problematic understanding of her own femininity, *Ultron* makes a statement that is very much in accordance with what early and contemporary feminist theorists say on the topics of female nature, virtue, and education. Through a detailed analysis of the film that draws on the theories of Christine de Pizan, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Laura Mulvey, this paper argues against the claims that Natasha's character arc in *Ultron* is anti-feminist and that it detracts from her status as a “strong female character,” ultimately showing that the ‘Black Widow controversy’ demonstrates a larger problem in western culture where the representation of a character is perceived through, and thus distorted or obscured by, the audience's preconceptions and expectations of the depiction.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I draw explicit examples from three online articles to support the existence of this debate (see Stern, Stewart, and Woerner and Trendacosta in the bibliography). However, these articles are merely three of many online sources that give a voice to both sides of the issue, as audience members also turned to platforms such as personal blogs, fan forums, and popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, to express and discuss their opinions.

Natasha earned her reputation as a strong female character through her role in *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Avengers*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), where she consistently proved herself to be an intelligent, resourceful, physically capable, independent, authoritative woman, and an invaluable agent of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.). In contrast, *Age of Ultron* supposedly restricts Natasha's character development to the sexist themes of romance and motherhood and reduces her character to a "damsel in distress" role (qtd. in Woerner and Trendacosta). In the controversial scene in question, the Avengers team has taken refuge at Clint Barton's (Hawkeye) secret residence to rest, regroup, and reflect on the threat that the megalomaniacal robot Ultron poses to humankind. Ultron was conceived by Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Bruce Banner as a "global peace-keeping initiative" meant to relieve the Avengers of their duty, but he ultimately "can't tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it," along with its heroes (*Ultron*). This talk about ending the team has all of the heroes aside from Clint, who has a home, a wife, and children, thinking about how and where they will fit into the world once they no longer need to defend it. In response to Bruce's assertion that the Hulk makes him a menace to society no matter where he goes, Natasha reveals troubling truths about herself that the previous Marvel films allude to but leave shrouded in mystery. Her "big confession" about her dark past and guilt-ridden self concerns her reproductive capacity, and she concludes with the rhetorical question, "You still think you're the only monster on the team?" Many fans criticized this reveal, taking it to mean that the character found her inability to fulfill her maternal capacity more disturbing and shameful than the number of immoral, unfeeling, and criminal acts that she had committed as a Russian spy (see Woerner and Trendacosta). The reveal implied that she was more upset about being a 'monster' in the physical sense than she was about being a 'monster' in the moral sense, and it insinuated that the worst

thing a woman can be is barren. However, the following analysis will show that physical and moral monstrousness are intimately linked in Natasha's mind as a result of the values instilled in her by her brutal upbringing at the Red Room Academy of espionage, as revealed in the film through flashback sequences. Furthermore, her use of the word "monster" in this context draws attention to its multiple definitions and symbolic connotations, which are explored and exploited throughout the film to great effect.

The theories of Christine de Pizan and Mary Wollstonecraft prove to be useful for contextualizing the controversial sentiment behind Natasha's remark, and for situating it in relation to her backstory, because in many ways, modern thinkers and audiences are still contending with the same issues and attitudes that these fourteenth- and nineteenth-century feminists first reacted against. Despite the centuries separating them from each other and from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, de Pizan and Wollstonecraft are both concerned with the harmful and inaccurate perception and representation of women in society and in art. They argue that the way to improve women's place in both domains is to improve the type and quality of education that women have access to. However, they have incompatible visions of what constitutes an improvement because their ideas regarding women's proper social roles differ. In her reaction piece to Jean de Montreuil's treatise on the *Roman de la Rose*, and in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, de Pizan takes issue with the "slanderous" descriptions, "false accusations, insults, and [the general] defamation of women" (*Rose* 206) that she repeatedly encounters in the literature of her time. In her view, "obscenity and misogyny [are] linked" (*City* 201), and she criticizes "those writers who condemn the entire female sex for being sinful" (*Rose* 214). She argues that such representations have prevailed and endured because women are not allowed access to the kind of education that would provide them with tools or skills to actively "counter images of female wickedness" (*City* 202).

However, she ultimately states that women should be educated because “knowledge of moral disciplines” makes them more virtuous — meaning polite, pleasing, and generally subservient (*Rose* 214). From a modern feminist perspective, it is therefore possible to view de Pizan’s own proto-feminist and hyper-conservative vision for appropriate female behaviour as an example of the very problem that she addresses and aims to remedy in the *City of Ladies*, and of the backwards feminism that Whedon’s film is accused of. One might construe de Pizan’s text itself as doing the same kind of “slanderous” work that she aggressively condemns, since she is essentially putting forth an unrealistic, idealised, and overly generalized definition of ‘woman.’ She writes, “[T]here’s nothing worse than a woman who is dissolute and depraved: she’s like a *monster*, a creature going against its own nature, which is to be timid, meek and pure” (214; emphasis mine). This is essentially the anti-feminist sentiment that Natasha appears to espouse in *Ultron* when she uses the word “monster” to refer to her sterilized body. Natasha seems to buy into the regressive idea that she is somehow not a woman — or that she is even inhuman — because her infertility, as a consequence and constant reminder of her murderous past, marks her as incapable of participating in de Pizan’s enduring definition of traditional femininity. Though this is problematic, it is only so at the level of the character — Natasha, as an individual, must learn to let go of these preconceived notions. As a representation, the character is a valid portrayal of a woman fighting to face and overcome traumas inflicted on her body and mind by the society in which she was brought up, while searching for a way to integrate into her current community. As a result, her character draws the viewer’s attention to the place and treatment of women in both milieus in order to provoke critical contemplation and reflection.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft likewise emphasizes the importance of educating women in all disciplines, but her arguments fundamentally oppose de

Pizan's, as she criticizes the "disorderly education" that promotes and perpetuates the prejudices that de Pizan values as truths (*Vindication* 499). Like de Pizan who attacks Jean de Montreuil, Wollstonecraft speaks out against Rousseau and other "male writers who have . . . warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point:—to render them pleasing" (503). She calls words such as "pleasing" mere epithets or "civil terms" for weakness (497) and explicitly includes women themselves as guilty parties in their own oppression when she writes that "[women] are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that . . . weakness, . . . cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety" is all they need to have, know, and/or be (496). In her view, women, like men, should instead receive an education that strengthens them physically, morally, and intellectually as independent individuals (498). However, though the strict and violent education that Natasha receives at the Red Room Academy seems to be closer to a distorted version of what Wollstonecraft posits as ideal, and though it is the opposite of the education that de Pizan feels women should have access to, it nevertheless instills Natasha with de Pizan's idealised notions of what traditional womanhood looks like and by design leaves her feeling like she "has no place in the world" (*Ultron*). In her conversation with Bruce, Natasha explains to him that her sterilization was forced as part of her graduation ceremony from the academy. The procedure aimed to make the young female trainees into better assassins, implying that it is easier to commit an unnatural act like murder if you yourself are 'unnatural.' In Natasha's words, the sterilization is meant to eliminate "the one thing that might matter more than a mission" — a child, or a family. In her flashback, an imposing maternal figure describes the ceremony as "necessary" and admonishes a young Natasha for being reluctant. By suggesting that it is not possible to be both fertile and an effective spy, this woman indirectly establishes a connection between reproductive

capacity and ‘normal’ female behaviour. Today, the idea that women are natural nurturers, and that motherhood is a fundamental and necessary component of female identity, is seen as regressive, oppressive, and false — and Whedon’s film acknowledges this. By situating the Black Widow controversy in a much deeper history of feminist thought, one notices that while the representation of women in art remains a problem, the issue is beginning to lie more and more on the side of reception rather than presentation. When Natasha calls herself monstrous, viewers must consider how her formative years consisted of consciously structuring her identity in complete opposition to what she was taught was natural. Audiences rightly reacted negatively to the implied ideology, but they mistakenly conflated the character’s misplaced beliefs with the filmmaker’s intended message. Through analysis, it becomes clear that the film highlights Natasha’s warped education and views as being problematic and is not, in fact, condoning or intentionally propagating them.

More generally, many viewers felt that Natasha’s ‘domestic’ or ‘gendered’ plotline turned her into “a baby-obsessed flirt,” immediately reduced her to her body, and weakened her in comparison to her male peers (Stern, “Black Widow Disgrace”). However, an analysis of the film’s themes reveals that her storyline is no more private-sphere oriented than any of the other Avengers’. Family is established as a central theme right from the start of the film: the opening shot shows twins Pietro and Wanda Maximoff (Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch) clasping hands, preparing to defend themselves against the Avengers. Later, Wanda uses her powers of mental manipulation to separately subject the Avengers to hallucinations that reveal their individual fears about not being able to protect the people that they love and feel responsible for, as well as their anxieties about not having homes or safe places to return to if they fail in their mission as Earth’s protectors. When Ultron calls the Avengers “discordant; disconnected,” he implies that they are a

dysfunctional unit and signals to the audience that the film is largely about the reconstitution of their family. From a thematic perspective, the developing connection between Natasha and Bruce therefore has weight and meaning. Furthermore, their discussion about their future together, and the fact that they broach the topic of starting a family at all, is justified within the context of that specific scene, which takes place when all of the Avengers are together in a traditional home environment. It is also significant that Bruce initiates the discussion; his desire for children is a component of his character that Whedon establishes in the first *Avengers* film when Natasha is sent to recruit him to the Avengers Initiative. Their very first conversation takes place in a house that does not belong to him, and while he contemplates and rocks an empty cradle, he tells her that because of his mutant alter-ego, he does not always “get what [he] want[s]” (*The Avengers*). Whenever Bruce transforms into the Hulk, he becomes a brutish, enraged monster with a lack of self-control and little capacity for deliberate moral action. In this way, he is continuously threatened by his own psychological, moral, and physical monstrosity, and it is precisely his desire for love, connection, and family that humanises him. That Natasha is criticized by the audience for becoming problematically *feminised* when she expresses these exact same values and desires reveals a frustrating double standard.

The main characters in *Age of Ultron* all share Natasha’s and Bruce’s struggle, which is defining ‘monster,’ defining ‘human,’ and defining themselves in relation to these two terms. However, no backlash was directed at the male characters for their unheroic moments of confusion, bitterness, and self-deprecation during that process. The theme of having a monstrous body and, by extension, a monstrous self is first introduced by Steve Rogers (Captain America) when he sarcastically asks a S.H.I.E.L.D. operative, “What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them to protect their country?” (*Ultron*). In this statement, he is referring to himself

as well as to the genetically enhanced Maximoff twins. If one separates this rhetorical question from Steve's unique and extraordinary circumstance, it can be construed as unpatriotic in the same way that Natasha's comment about herself can be interpreted as anti-feminist, and yet audiences remained silent. In an interview conducted by Marlow Stern for *Newsweek* magazine in 2013, Whedon presents readers with one possible way to understand and connect how monstrousness relates to each of the Avengers, gender aside, by quoting writer Junot Diaz: "If you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves" (qtd. in Stern). Like Natasha who feels out of place in 'normal' society, Steve has found that his biological modifications have rendered him a man out of place and time: he is an anachronism. Thor, though human in form, is not human at all: he is a god from another dimension. Likewise, Clint undergoes minor biological modifications at the start of the film when an injury to his side is healed with synthetic flesh, prompting him to exclaim, "I'm gonna live forever; I'm going to be made of plastic" (*Ultron*). However, whereas Steve and Thor would undeniably be out of place in the modern world if they could no longer call themselves Avengers, Clint would still be able to define himself within his culture and society as a father and a husband. While some fans took issue with his wife Laura being a pregnant, stay-at-home mom (see Stewart), and many attacked Natasha for lamenting her inability to identify with such a stereotypically traditional lifestyle (see Stern), there was little criticism aimed at Clint himself for being wrong or weak for deriving comfort and strength from such a life of security and stability. Overall, the fan reaction indicates that audiences hold male and female superhero characters to different standards of representation. Furthermore, when audiences condemned Natasha for feeling isolated and dehumanized by her inability to find a cultural reflection of herself in the world around her, they essentially overlooked and/or devalued

the potential of — and the need for — the Black Widow character to be a cultural figure for viewers who share her experiences and feelings.

A fundamental challenge that the characters in *Ultron* face when defining their identities is recognizing and accepting that their ‘monstrousness’ is still a part of who they are. Before the final assault against Ultron, Steve says, “Ultron thinks we’re monsters; that we are what’s wrong with the world. This isn’t just about beating him. It’s about whether he’s right” (*Ultron*). In other words, their final fight is about proving that they are heroes despite — and in many ways, because of — the aspects of themselves that they perceive to be monstrous. In addition to his physical monstrousness, Bruce must confront the monstrous aspects of his wholly human side, as he must accept partial responsibility for Ultron’s creation. Tony Stark, whose body is made super-human by his Iron Man suit, faces a similar moral conflict. While encouraging Bruce to aid him in righting what they made wrong when they created Ultron, he says, “We’re mad scientists. We’re monsters buddy. We gotta own it” (*Ultron*). Perhaps most surprisingly, Ultron himself expresses anxiety over his monstrousness. Aside from planetary destruction, his focus, which leads to his eventual undoing, is his desire to acquire a more human form. Using a revolutionary technological device known as the Regeneration Cradle, he intends to build himself an organic-seeming body into which he will upload his consciousness. When this process goes awry, it gives birth to a benevolent android known as the Vision in a scene brimming with *Frankenstein* allusions. This newest member of the Avengers team also articulates concern for his connection with the word ‘monster’: “Maybe I am a monster. I don’t think I’d know if I were one” (*Ultron*). Ultimately, the film is centred on bodies and steeped in reproductive rhetoric. In the simplest terms, it is about technology encroaching on biology on a macro scale, and this is appropriately reflected on the micro scale of the individual characters as they search for which role they can play in society aside from ‘hero.’

A truly sexist approach would be to prevent Natasha's character from participating in this discussion based on her gender. Therefore, just like the rest of the team, her struggle in *Ultron* is about reconceptualising and reconciling seemingly incompatible parts of her self — cold-blooded killer, 'broken' woman, and superheroine — and if anything, this character arc renders her stronger and more complex.

The Black Widow controversy as a phenomenon seems to demonstrate, and to have arisen out of, the inflated expectations that contemporary audiences have for representations of women in art. Natasha's character arc, and the conflict surrounding it, can arguably be seen as a dramatization of the struggle to define the 'strong female character' archetype, or as an expression of the problem at its center. The idea of a strong female character seems to participate in what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "myth of woman." In *The Second Sex*, she explains that "against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women," there is a "transcendental Idea" of femininity, and "[if] the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behaviour of flesh-and-blood women . . . we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine" (1265). The Black Widow character shows audiences that the same argument can apply to what constitutes 'strong' femininity, and characters who supposedly do, or do not, embody it. Since audiences revoked Natasha's 'strong' status based on private information about her past, an uncomfortable truth about her female body, and the emotional way in which it was revealed, it seems fair to say that a large part of her perceived strength in the previous Marvel films came from her stoicism and secrecy. *Age of Ultron* momentarily does away with these aspects of her character. De Beauvoir argues that "[of] all the myths [of woman], none is more firmly anchored in [people's] hearts than that of the feminine 'mystery'" (1268). She points out that reader

or viewer dissatisfaction is inevitable when one invests in this type of myth, as mystery is fundamentally unsustainable “unless the story remains unfinished” (1270). She writes,

[Once] the springs of [the character’s] action are revealed to the reader, they are seen to be very simple mechanisms: this woman was a spy, that one a thief; however clever the plot, there is always a key; and it could not be otherwise, had the author all the talent and imagination in the world. Mystery is never more than a mirage that vanishes as we draw near to look at it. (1271)

Instead of criticizing the film for removing Natasha’s impassive mask, audiences should therefore seize it as an opportunity to locate her strength — not just as a woman, but as a person — in a deeper, more genuine, and concrete aspect of her character. While the idea of strong female characters is not intentionally insidious, it is linked too closely to the problem of defining ‘real’ womanhood or femininity, which is something that contemporary feminist theory argues is impossible. According to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, “‘female’ no longer appears to be a stable notion, [and] its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as ‘women’” (2541). Overall, Natasha seems to be an example of how in the contemporary artist’s desire to depict, and in the public’s desire to see, ‘truthful’ or ‘accurate’ representations of strong, brave, and independent women, female characters are often denied the right to be well-rounded human beings who struggle with weaknesses, fears, and insecurities underneath or alongside their admirable qualities.

Today, there seem to be just as many problems with the way in which women are depicted and perceived in different forms of art and media as there were in Christine de Pizan’s and Mary Wollstonecraft’s days. In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey discusses the sexualized representation of women in contemporary film. She argues that “[traditionally], the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the

characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (2089). Fans often direct a similar criticism at the portrayal of Black Widow in the Marvel films, as she regularly takes on characteristics of a sensual, flirtatious femme fatale. However, a key element of Natasha’s effectiveness as an agent and as an Avenger is her ability to *use* her sexuality and consciously *perform* her gender to deceive her enemies. In this way, she frequently manipulates and subverts her own objectification, which suggests that there is a certain awareness of the processes described in Mulvey’s theory operating within these films. Mulvey goes on to argue that as a result of the “active/passive heterosexual division of labour” that structures narrative film, when a female character engages in a relationship with a male character, the spectator indirectly “[gains] control and possession of the woman within the diegesis” by “projecting his [own] look” or gaze and identifying with the man on the other side of the screen (2089). This process potentially describes why audiences may view romantic relationships with men as harmful to strong female characters, since viewers have essentially been conditioned by the very structure and techniques of film to expect objectification, misrepresentation, and oppression for the women onscreen. For many viewers of *Ultron*, Natasha’s canonical romance with Bruce merely cemented her into the role of love interest and leant support to the criticism that she largely functions in the Marvel films as a body for her male teammates, fans, and opponents to ogle. Mulvey essentially describes the extraneous role that Natasha is accused of assuming when she writes that although the “presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film . . . her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line. . . . This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative” (2088). However, for viewers of *Ultron*, it was not only the sexualisation of Natasha’s body which derailed her character development and rendered her disruptive to the narrative; audiences also viewed the bold and serious discussion of

her body, as well as her emotional, sincere attachment to a man, as equally harmful despite the thematic relevance and importance of these plot points. The analysis of these conflicting audience perspectives reveals a troublesome hypocrisy and an impossible standard for representations of women that ultimately amounts to a complete denial of the female body. It seems that a superheroine like Natasha can have a body, but she must not show or share too much of it, or talk about it too honestly.

Because empowering and empowered female characters are such a rarity, the audience has developed very high expectations and hyper-sensitivity regarding their portrayal. As many fans on both sides of the Black Widow conflict pointed out, for Natasha, the pressure is intensified by the fact that she is presently the biggest female hero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. De Pizan criticizes Jean de Montreuil for daring “to defame and to insult, without exception, an entire sex” (*Rose* 210), but as I have attempted to demonstrate, this sentiment can also apply to positive representations. Audiences seem to have forgotten that characters represent universals *and* particulars. They have likewise forgotten that women are also humans, and humans are allowed to be flawed, and to sometimes *feel* weak, scared, and lost. Overall, in arguing that Natasha’s entire status as a ‘strong female character’ can be reversed and effaced by a single brief reference to her reproductive organs, those who hold that view are guilty of the very thing they think they are standing up against: defining a woman and judging her intelligence, worth, and strength, in relation to her body. Since it appears there is nothing intrinsically sexist or anti-feminist in her backstory or character arc, if Natasha Romanoff becomes weak or two-dimensional in *Age of Ultron* after revealing her personal trauma, it is only because the audience makes the decision to stop seeing her as psychologically complex. As Ultron says, “Typical humans! They scratch the surface, and never think to look within.”

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