

“You Really Think I’m Pretty?”: The Problem of Gender Representation in *The Avengers*

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In a 2012 interview, Joss Whedon expressed his interest in including The Wasp, a.k.a. Janet van Dyne, in his blockbuster hit *The Avengers*. However, when actress Scarlett Johansson—who had previously portrayed Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010)—became available, he scrapped plans to include The Wasp despite having fallen in love with the character. “Ultimately it would have been just too much,” he stated (Knolle n.p.).

The Avengers portrays two strong, decisive, heroic female characters—Black Widow, a.k.a. Natasha Romanov, and S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Maria Hill (Cobie Smulders), Nick Fury’s second-in-command. These are not the simpering token female inclusions of other comic book films. Yet given Whedon’s background as an outspoken feminist, his creation of works such as the female-centric *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the equal gender representation of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, and considering his work with Equality Now, whose mission is to end discrimination against women, it seems problematic that Whedon’s conception of the team of Avengers still suffers from the Smurfette Principle and may only include one female character. Romanov, a central member of the team, has a substantial amount of screen time, and she is portrayed as intelligent and cunning, using gender expectations of men around her to her advantage. Hill, who clocks a good deal less screen time, is nonetheless quick, smart, and commanding. These depictions go far to further gender representation, particularly in a genre known for overtly sexualized female costumes and token characterizations. However, in a high-profile film like *The Avengers*, it is disappointing that even Whedon fails to craft a film that passes the Bechdel Test, leaving one to surmise that equality is not quite now, after all.

Work Cited:

Knolle, Sharon. "'The Avengers': Director Joss Whedon Talks Hulk Success And Favorite Scene." *AOL Moviefone*. AOL.com, 27 Apr. 2012. Web. 18 Jan. 2014.