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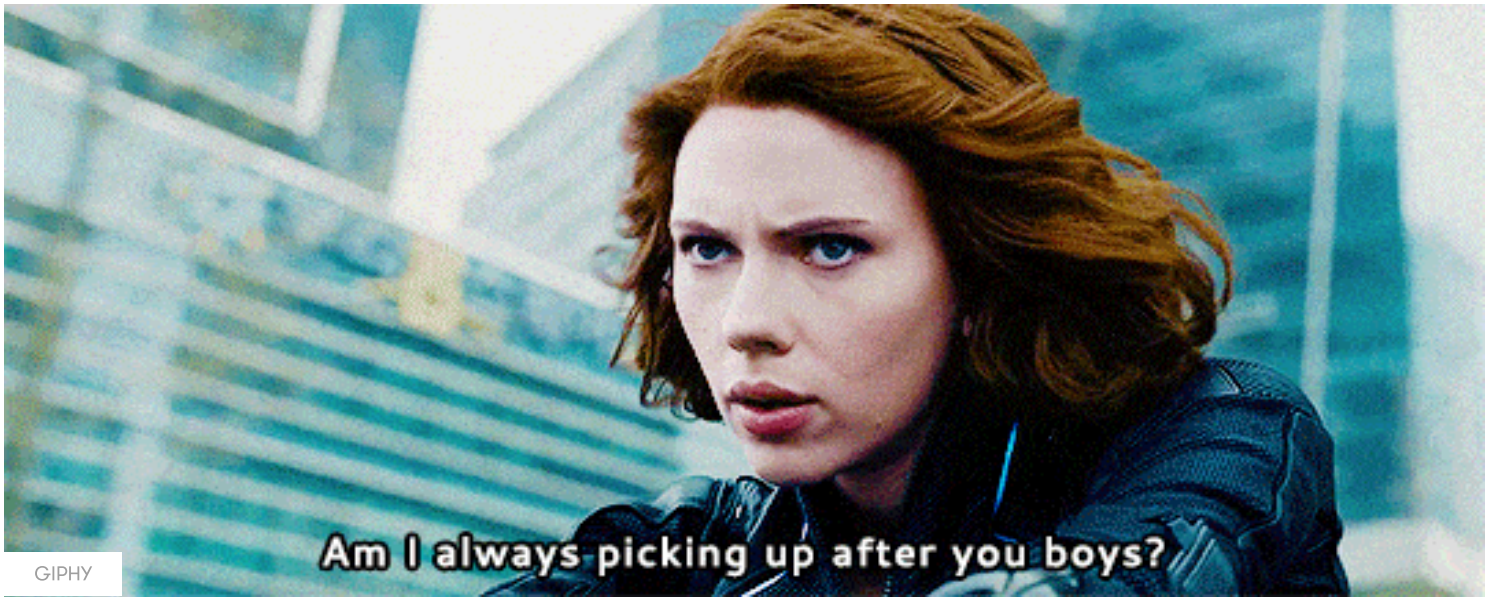
I Loved 'Avengers: Endgame' — But, Please, No More Token Female Empowerment

After a decade of movies and male superheroes, it's time for Marvel to allow female characters to be powerful — even when guys are around.

By Madeleine Deliee APR 30, 2019



Hi. If you're still playing dodgeball with social media and trying to avoid knowing plot details and reveals of *Avengers: Endgame*, stop reading right now. Seriously, *right now*.

If you're still here, you probably have some feelings about this weekend's blockbuster finale that's been 10 years in the making. Mine, like many fans, come from a longstanding, deep-seated investment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Pre *Endgame* viewing, I didn't let my son wear his Captain America T-shirt during the week leading up to the release because I wanted to guarantee it would be clean for the big day. My family planned seating for opening night with a strategy that rivaled

the Battle of Normandy. *Avengers: Endgame* was an event, a serious occasion, and one that — through 22 films — has been building for more than a decade.

> **Marvel still doesn't quite have the female empowerment thing down.**

For the most part, the movie didn't disappoint. It masterfully drew together and completed storylines we've watched and enjoyed for years, moving mainstays like Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) and newer favorites like Shuri (Letitia Wright) into place to conclude one chapter and begin another. The three hour run time flew by, but there was one big problem: Marvel still doesn't *quite* have the female empowerment thing down.

They tried. They really did. And as my friend from Alabama would say, "Bless their hearts!" But, despite two clear opportunities for substantive female contribution, some of Marvel's most seemingly integral and powerful female superheroes were instead sacrificed on the altar of one inorganically-constructed moment.

For example, it was clear the final showdown with Thanos had to involve the original Avengers. Contracts were up, fatalities were inevitable, and the symmetry of movie storytelling deemed it necessary. The arc began with Tony Stark in the first *Iron Man* back in 2008 and, therefore, it needed to end with him as well. Fair. I can concede *that*.

However, the way Natasha/Black Widow (Scarlett Johannson) was handled was a definite downer for me. After finally developing some much-needed character layers and struggling to hold the remaining Avengers together after The Snap, she met her demise, thanks to the sacrificial lion trope. But that wasn't even the true crime here. That Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) wasn't sacrificed instead — and I confess, I wish he had been — meant the Thanos confrontation later in the film was mostly an all-male scene.

And that was disappointing, particularly after all the build up of Captain Marvel (Brie Larson) as *the* strongest Avenger. I mean, Nick Fury paged her *specifically* at the end of *Infinity War*, making us believe she was clearly the one to stop Thanos. She was also coming off the first female-led Marvel standalone film, which meant the studio was moving toward feminism, right? Ehhh...not so much.

In *Endgame*, Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel felt like a guest star, popping off to handle matters elsewhere in the universe only to reappear toward the conclusion of the movie — and fail at vanquishing Thanos. Yes, it was a group effort. Yes, she spectacularly, single-handedly destroyed his ship. Yes, the guys needed her to wear Thanos down. But the message was still pretty clear: Saving the world is ultimately a man's job. It's tough to reconcile the way *Endgame* handled its female characters with what we see in daily life, as well as other onscreen representations (ahem, *Game of Thrones*).

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But wait, I know what some of you are thinking: "What about that *awesome* moment when Captain Marvel is about to be destroyed and then nearly all the female

characters in the MCU (except Peggy and, oddly, Sharon Carter) show up, announce they have her back, and are there to save the day?"

Well, the problem is… they don't. Instead, we get this big "girl power" moment with a bunch of women we haven't spent any time with...and then they're all defeated.

> **The message was still pretty clear: Saving the world is ultimately a man's job.**

Each woman is picked off by Thanos or his minions or, in the case of Captain Marvel, literally tossed aside. While I appreciate that Marvel tried to pull off a damn-the-fanboys moment, it felt like I was just being thrown a bone. It was sort of like the toolkit I got for my 21st birthday. I knew it was for girls because all the handles were pink. Similarly, I knew this was the "women kick ass" moment because it included a super obvious tagline — "She's not alone!" — and a tableau that looked ready-made for the sure-to-follow poster.

Still, that's not to say that moments like that aren't important. Or I didn't love this movie — I really did, and so did my kids, and so did a lot of people around the world who cheered when the ladies got in formation.

But when the follow-through doesn't quite fit the build up, it's hard not to leave the theater with a muddled message about female potential. As great as it was to see Captain America finally pick up Thor's hammer, imagine the awe if it had been Captain Marvel who'd been (and, frankly, is) worthy enough to wield it. Sure, Marvel Studios is moving in the right direction when it comes to giving different types of heroes the opportunity to shine. I just wish they'd get there a little faster.

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