UNCOUPLING LOVE: RETHINKING ROMANTIC NORMS IN *PROFESSOR MARSTON AND THE WONDER WOMEN*[*]

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Abstract

This paper analyses the representation of consensual non-monogamies in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017), a film that portrays a long-term polyamorous relationship without resorting to the sensationalism that has often characterised depictions of non-monogamous intimacy in fiction. The paper discusses three dimensions: the impact of public judgement on the characters' ability to live openly; the ways in which internalised stigma shapes their selfperception and relationship dynamics; and the performative strategies they adopt to navigate scrutiny, protect their bond, and craft a sustainable everyday life. I argue that the film offers a rare, grounded portrayal of polyamory that foregrounds relational labour, mutual care, and the complexities of sustaining non-monogamous intimacy. In so doing, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* challenges dominant fictional tropes by presenting non-monogamy as a valid and emotionally rich relational model, encouraging audiences to reconsider assumptions about what constitutes legitimate romantic relationships.

Keywords: Consensual Non-monogamies, Polyamory, Film, Internalised Stigma, Non-normative Relational Models, Border Families.

DESEMPAREJAR EL AMOR: REPENSAR LAS NORMAS ROMÁNTICAS EN *PROFESSOR MARSTON AND THE WONDER WOMEN*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación de las no monogamias éticas en *El Profesor Marston y la Mujer Maravilla* (2017), película que muestra una relación poliamorosa de larga duración sin recurrir al sensacionalismo que con frecuencia ha caracterizado las representaciones de la intimidad no monógama en la ficción. Abordo tres dimensiones: el impacto del juicio público en la capacidad de los personajes para vivir abiertamente; las formas en que el estigma interiorizado moldea su autopercepción y su relación; y las estrategias performativas que adoptan para gestionar el escrutinio, proteger su vínculo y construir una cotidianidad sostenible. Sostengo que la película ofrece una representación del poliamor, que pone en primer plano el trabajo relacional, el cuidado mutuo y las complejidades de una intimidad no monógama. Así, desafía los tropos dominantes al presentar la no monogamia como un modelo relacional válido y emocionalmente rico.

Palabras clave: No monogamias éticas, poliamor, película, estigma interiorizado, modelos relacionales no normativos, familias liminales.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.08
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 155-169; ISSN: e-2530-8335
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1. INTRODUCTION

> Desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and cultivate them. (Berlant 2000, 5)

To talk about romantic love is to talk about intimacy and the hegemony of the couple. In a society shaped to make things easier for people sharing lives in two-adult clusters, there is little room for exploration outside of that norm. Such counter-hegemonic realities include the choice of staying single, aro-ace (aromantic and/or asexual) identities as opposed to compulsory allosexuality, or any expression of non-monogamy defined as the desire to establish more than one intimate relationship –sexual, romantic, and/or platonic. When discussing conveniences around the ideal of the couple, Roma De las Heras (2023 in C. Atance et al.) questions its conception as the *natural* way of cohabiting and relating to people, as it has been imposed as a societal construct rather than constituting an actual natural disposition. She also discusses how spheres, both public and private, are shaped around the ideal of the couple, including romantic weekend trips, holiday packages, and house layouts, among others (also in Jenkins 2025), always designed to fit into the preconception of coupling being the only available option. This hegemony of the couple is also flagrantly present in monogamy, understood "not only as a personal practice, but also as a social institution, as a political, ideological, and economic regime" (De las Heras 2018, 650; also discussed in Robinson 1997; and Vasallo 2013). Hegemonic on its own, monogamy is presented in Western cultures as natural (Willey 2016; Kean 2018), superior (Barker[1] & Langdridge 2010), universal (De las Heras 2018), and ultimately good (Kean 2018), and therefore the only valid script for affective relationships (De las Heras 2018).

Popular culture, as Rothschild points out, "shapes people's worldview, their emotional language, and their mindset" (2018, 40) and works as a mirror of society and is hence "another medium through which monogamy is shaped as the social default" (Rothschild 2018, 28). Monogamy is presented in popular culture not only as the "natural" and unquestionable relational style, but as the only possibility when it comes to intimacy (Casielles in C. Atance et al 2023). Such fallacy leads to the widespread belief that there is no other way of doing things, and so "living in a world that has been structured to fit only one kind of intimate relationship makes any other way of living intimacy come with a set of challenges" (C. Atance et al 2023, 59, my translation). It is precisely when fiction does not offer any further representation of relational diversity that "those who don't or can't find their way in that story –the

* This article was written in the context of the Research Projects PID2021-122249NB-I00 and PID2024-156566NB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033, and by ERDF, EU.

[1] Following the reference guidelines, this is the name given in the publication for this author. However, I would like to remark that they currently are known as Meg-John Barker.

queers, the single, the something else– can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves" (Berlant 2000, 6), which challenges the one-size-fits-all stance according to which "only one plot counts as "life" (6). Moreover, those rare existing representations of alternative relational styles in mainstream media are "usually focus[ed] on revealing their inevitable failure" (Rothschild 2018, 30). Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton similarly reflect on how "the one-size-fits-all "romance" narrative can lead [people] to try to force all [their] relationships into it, whether or not that story is a good fit for [them], the real, nonfictional person in front of [them], and the relationship [they] could build together" (2017, 157), which challenges the idea of the couple as being intrinsically and unmovably prioritised before all other relationships.

Based on a true story and released in 2017, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (also referred to as only *Professor Marston* below) offers an account of the life of William Moulton Marston (1893-1947), his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston (1893-1993), and the relationship they both shared with Olive Byrne (1904-1985). William was a well-known psychologist and university professor who posed the so-called DISC theory (dominance, inducement, submission, and compliance) and who, together with Elizabeth (also a psychologist herself), designed the first prototype of the polygraph. Within the course of their married life, they met Olive, a university student, who would later inspire William's DC comic heroine Wonder Woman. The film is initially set in 1928, in Harvard Radcliffe College, where William (played by Luke Evans) is a professor of psychology. He and his wife and co-researcher Elizabeth (Rebecca Hall) are looking for an assistant among his students to help them in the study of emotions and how they affect body reactions when participants tell lies. The most suitable candidate, and a passionate follower of their work, Olive (Bella Heathcote), joins them in their research after her first lesson with William. Soon after, the tension among them intensifies, up until the point of William acknowledging being in love with Olive. Olive, on the other hand, confesses it is Elizabeth who she is falling for. Following a brief period of confusion and rejection, the three of them come to terms with each other's feelings and start sharing a romantic and sexual relationship. Once Olive gets pregnant, the three try to find a way to get a life together. As part of that life, Elizabeth starts working as a secretary and William eventually creates comic heroine Wonder Woman, based on Elizabeth and Olive fused into one person, mixed with their recently discovered attraction to bondage. In the course of more than a decade together, each of the two women gives birth to two children and the seven of them live together as a happy family. It is only when one of their neighbours finds out about the true nature of their relationship that they put an end to it. At that same time, William's comics are being investigated by the Child Study Association of America, thought to be provocative and not suitable for its target audience. Only once William is in hospital due to what later will be diagnosed as cancer, Olive goes back to the married couple and they resume their life together, almost coinciding with the temporal banning of the Wonder Woman comics. As the final credits disclose, he would die in 1947, and the two women would live together until Olive's passing away in 1985.

Scepticism around polyamory and other consensual non-monogamies usually rests on two ideas. First, that they merely serve as an excuse for infidelity; and, second,

that they amount to nothing more than a throwaway body count with no intention of deeper connection whatsoever. These, together with the little representation of successful non-monogamous relationships that popular culture offers, inevitably leads to their invisibilization and stigmatisation. However, when representations of CNM end up in breakup, it is taken as an indication of its failure (Hardy and Easton 2017), whereas monogamous breakups never seem to imply the deficiency of monogamy as such. Through the analysis of polyamory in *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017), this article emphasises the importance of pieces of fiction that defy both the passive and the active erasure that consensual non-monogamies are subject to, "passively by scarce representations of CNM alternatives, and actively by negative portrayal of characters who breach the monogamous order, who are either punished or brought back into it" (Rothschild 2018, 38). Such pieces of fiction, then, oppose the common depiction of a "triad or 'V' disrupted by a tragedy that leads either to a seemingly inevitable return to a monogamous pairing or to the fated misery of a wounded soul who has learned a hard lesson (by attempting nonmonogamy)" (Willey 2015, 623). The article first discusses the public reception of a polyamorous relationship, and people's attitudes and preconceptions. The second part of the analysis explores internalised stigma surrounding non-monogamies and how the characters move (or not) towards self-acceptance. The last section of the article is devoted to performativity as a coping mechanism, looking at how both those inside of the relationship and those who are only observers interplay with ideas of disguise and fantasies of normativity.

2. "WHAT WE WANT CAN NEVER HAPPEN": PUBLIC SCRUTINY AND REJECTION

Public views on realities that differ from hegemony provide an excellent opportunity for measuring how difference is seen from the outside and to what extent it is rejected or accepted. In *Professor Marston,* such rejection is made clear from the very first scene, and even before the characters are introduced. In a flashforward, a group of people is shown gathering Wonder Woman comics just to throw them into a lit bonfire while repeatedly chanting they should "burn them!" (00:01:09-00:01:34). This first impression is by no means misleading, as it summarises all the attitudes and perceptions that most of the secondary characters display towards polyamory or any challenge to hegemony. As Sara Ahmed claims, in order to be accepted by a community, you first "must become acceptable to a world that has already decided what is acceptable" (2009, n.p.), and this scene in the film clearly represents what society is not willing to accept.

Throughout the entire film, in a set of flashes back and forth in time, William is shown being investigated and questioned by the Head of the Child Study Association of America regarding the (in)decency portrayed in his comics, as "Wonder Woman has drawn criticism for being full of depictions of bondage, spanking, torture, homosexuality, and other sex perversions" (00:02:02-00:02:10) not suitable for children who, from the first editions of the collection, had been shown laughing

and having fun while reading such comics. In a quite straightforward metaphor, the unnamed interviewer impersonates not only that censorship she is imposing on behalf of the association she represents, but also what could be identified as normativity. By policing the content of the comics, which William has been making increasingly provocative in response to the Head of the Child Study Association of America first attempts of cancelling the series, she is also constraining the possibility of any lifestyle that does not adhere to what is socially considered as "natural" or "normal" (De las Heras 2018). The association, then, is only willing to offer the readers one possible narrative to which their lives should adjust. It is Elizabeth, right after the three of them have accepted their feelings one way or another, who first comes to the realisation that "what [they] want can never happen" not because of them considering it particularly wrong, but because "the world won't let it" (00:37:03-00:37:11), as the interviewer proves.

Such external constraint aligns with Lauren Berlant's idea that intimacy "reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic" (Berlant 2000, 7), where polyamory in this case can never be contained within the "unproblematic," and rules are tacitly dictated in order to keep any sort of deviations at bay. The number one rule of that set might unsurprisingly be that of staying "normal." While definitions of normalcy and what could or should be considered as such are always biased and hold a certain level of prejudice and usually also privilege, it is my contention that the film clearly depicts compulsory heterosexuality, the nuclear family and mononormativity as the only accepted set of choices for intimacy. While the term itself suggests that whatever happens within that intimacy should remain, indeed, intimate, public reactions to what happens behind closed doors construct a recurring narrative on several occasions in *Professor Marston*. In order to exemplify this, I consider the two moments in which the protagonists' lives suffer a sudden and drastic change: when they are first outed, and both William and Elizabeth lose their jobs and when they are discovered by a neighbour and almost forced to move if they do not end their relationship.

In the first of these two situations, their evident joy when they are together walking around campus, together with a couple of a-bit-too-close moments of physical contact, begins to raise suspicion. The snowballing effect ends first with Olive's engagement with her until-then fiancé Brant, and almost simultaneously with the Marstons' career as university staff members. Although such an involuntary unveiling of their intimacy might be inconvenient to say the least, it is the apparent outrage they provoke in others, who even consider them depraved, that transforms them into what Sara Ahmed calls "affect aliens," as "the object in which [they invest their] happiness is unworthy" (2010, 35). This first exposure of their private life not only leads to their firing, but it also profoundly hinders William's attempts at getting a new job, as the key and almost only important question he receives from his interviewer is "are you all still together?," and while William answers right away "I don't see how my personal life is anyone's business" (00:56:48-00:56:55), the fact that he does not get the new position makes it clear that his personal life carries a lot more weight than he believes or might be willing to admit.

The scene that takes place right after the three of them are caught having intimate intercourse in their own house proves even more revealing. It is 1940, and they have been living in the same house for around six years already when one of their neighbours walks in unannounced, following the noises she hears until she finds the three of them half-naked in a rather compromising situation: Olive kissing Elizabeth, who is at the same time tied up together with William. Next on screen, one of their kids is shown coming back home from school with a black eye and a bloody lip, and his bike with a flat tire. This evident backlash coming from the neighbour's kids beating up Donn is even excused by his bully's mother: "you're passing your life as normal, and it's not. You can live your life however you want, it's a free country. But when it comes to my kids, I'm sorry but I don't want them exposed to people like you" (01:24:28-01:24:40). This is an argument deeply rooted in the utter fear of the unknown or the different, and which allegedly justifies "the repetition of violence against the bodies of others in the name of protecting" (Ahmed 2014, 47) what is understood as normative. Such counter-normative behaviour, Carrie Jenkins argues, is read as threatening by others who adhere to hegemonic rules (2024). Once branded as "fucking freaks" and "perverts" (01:24:50-01:24:57), Elizabeth decides to put an end to their relationship, having broken the promise of not letting it "come back on [their] children" (00:57:59-00:58:00). Although it is a unilateral decision, both Olive and William comply with it, and Olive leaves the family house with her two (biological) children. Such outcome, however rational it might appear to be, reflects the extent to which external views on their intimacy condition them, and how their love life is subjected to scrutiny and judged upon with utter impunity. Interestingly, there is no intention to idealise polyamory at all, an idea that is even opposed by Elizabeth when she recognises "perhaps they are right to beat us ... because we're foolish enough to think that we're better than them" (01:27:10-01:27:19). By reflecting on this idea of moral superiority, she briefly tackles on what has been termed mono-poly wars –the confrontation between "polyphobia" and "polypride" (Ferrer 2018)– and accepts both relational styles are flawed and therefore valid, which is the overall tone of the film.

However, this is not the first, nor the only time in the film in which a third party constructs an image of a person they do not know. Although in a more analytic way, it is Elizabeth who studies Olive's behaviour from afar, even before any of them have officially met. In this scene, Olive is avoiding a man's eye contact and shown as rather conflicted with his closeness in campus. Meanwhile, the couple are talking about her being the most suitable candidate, and Elizabeth cannot avoid but noticing how she "averts her eyes. If she makes eye contact with that boy for too long, he will misunderstand and think she's interested. And then, when she invariably rejects his advances, he'll think she's a slut" (00:06:07-00:06:20). Yet, it is not only him who would read Olive that way, as Elizabeth herself aggressively and openly warns her: "if you fuck my husband, I'll kill you" (00:08:40-00:08:42), insisting that she is only "asking [her] the courtesy of please not fucking [her] husband" (00:09:04-00:09:07), in a bout of jealousy that I further discuss in the next section.

3. "OUR LOVE IS ILLEGAL": THE INTIMATE PATH TOWARDS SELF-ACCEPTANCE

It is not unusual to see characters being conflicted with their choices, even more so when such choices transgress convenient social norms. *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* biographical drama is no exception to this unwritten rule, as it features the internal conflict of its three main characters when they face the possibility of building a relationship first, and a life together afterwards. Although they are very much influenced by their environment and America in the 1920s-1940s is not a period specially known for its welcoming of otherness, they do belong to a specific social sphere that allows them to see the world through the lens of change and possibility. On the one hand, Olive is the daughter of radical feminist Ethel Byrne and niece of birth control activist Margaret Sanger, while on the other hand the Marstons have actively supported the two of them in their fight for women's suffrage and are repeatedly shown bypassing Prohibition. I argue that their background is the perfect breeding ground for them to navigate the difficulties they face throughout their relationship. While both internal and external conflicts are depicted in the film, the generally optimistic tone in which it is set invites growth and a positive development towards acceptance. It is not, however, a straightforward path for them to follow, but rather a journey marked by bends and dark alleys.

Polyamory is based on the lack of sexual and/or romantic exclusivity and the rejection of belonging to someone (Barker & Langdridge 2010), and although the specifics that rule each relationship are unique and cannot be extrapolated to all of them, it is a *sine qua non* condition for a relationship to be considered polyamorous. This non-exclusivity is first hinted in the film during the already mentioned conversation between William and Elizabeth when they are both focused on Olive's behaviour. Once William has stated his desire to further understand her, Elizabeth invites him to satisfy his curiosity ensuring him she does "not experience sexual jealousy," and she goes on: "Who am I to fight nature? I'm your wife, not your jailor" (00:07:26-00:07:33). While such a first so-understanding and open reaction would suggest that she is, indeed, fine with him exploring whatever he wants to, Elizabeth soon displays a significant degree of jealousy when she faces Olive and threatens her. William's immediate confusion when he learns what has happened between the two women gets verbalised when he puts forward, "before, you said it was all right" (00:11:39-00:11:40). However natural, Elizabeth changing her mind becomes destabilising for a couple that has been shown to be close and solid until then. Elizabeth's internal conflict when facing her own jealousy, I argue, complies with the conception of romantic relationships as intrinsically exclusive and jealousy itself as an inescapable feeling rather than a set of reactions that –as it is made obvious as the film continues– can be worked through.

It is not until some time later, when the three of them have grown fonder of each other, that they begin to experience some level of intimate attachment and eventually confess their feelings –literally "confessing" in the first instance, as they do so while testing their lie detector. Their fully-consensual polyamorous relationship hence begins with this tripartite confession, thus aligning with Deborah Anapol's

definition of polyamory as simply "loving more than one person at a time when it comes to romantic or erotic love" (2010, 1), and grows as the film continues. Their relationship is first characterised by a too-obvious infatuation around campus and a highly sexual drive, but develops into a more romantic-driven one as the years go by. As their shared new relationship energy fades, their polyamorous relationship settles into a more stable and family-oriented one with the birth of the four children that they raise together. What initially functioned as a source of jealousy within the married couple, reaches a turning point when they move towards feelings of compersion, defined as "the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another" (Ritchie & Barker 2006, 14). Thus, initial hard feelings of jealousy and envy turn into an until-then unknown possibility of enjoying through another person's joy as an act of selfless love. In Elizabeth's words, "maybe I'm in love with her too. Or maybe I just want her because you do" (00:35:49-00:35:57). The turn from utter compersion to their own experienced joy is portrayed on screen through a set of consecutive scenes showing Olive's rejection of her until-then fiancé, her pregnancy, and later their negotiations around moving together and starting their family.

When exploring this new relationship that they are discovering together, there are at least two social ideals they must confront: marriage and the building up of a family. Although marriage itself is not directly discussed as part of their agreements, nor is it something they seem to be conflicted with, Olive and Elizabeth do share a conversation around the idea of marriage and its meaning that is worth discussing, as it differs from what could be considered normative, at least in the 1920s. Curious about their relationship and how long they have been together, Olive asks Elizabeth when they met and when they got married. Almost daydreaming, Elizabeth explains that William had to ask her more than once before she considered accepting. Olive then asks, "what made you hesitate?," to which Elizabeth concedes, "I was afraid I would always be in his shadow." She insists, "why did you say yes?," "[because] he respects me and loves me" (00:27:50-00:28:13). Coincidentally or not, Elizabeth chooses to place respect before love, which is established as the core of a relationship in which love can fluctuate, come and go, but mutual respect is expected to stay intact, as it is constantly shown in the way both of them support each other in their research and, more prominently, in how William tries to support Elizabeth in her endless struggle to be recognised by Harvard and not only by its "sister school" Radcliffe (00:02:52).

Not only marriage gets reimagined, as from the moment Olive first gets pregnant they agree that "it's [Elizabeth's] child also" (00:55:20-00:55:22), which opens up the possibility for a non-nuclear family structure, or what Pallotta-Chiarolli calls "border families," referring –among others– to "family members who are in openly negotiated loving/intimate/sexual relationships with more than one person" (2010, 2). Their reconfiguration of the family is possibly the one point around which they are less conflicted: they do not struggle in showing their love to their kids, the three of them are actively involved in their upbringing, and even the kids are used to call both women their mother. Such work around the normalisation of this border family offers

a refreshing view on polyamory and how it can –and does– go beyond the merely intimate sphere and how it constitutes an alternative not only to the monogamous practice of coupling, but also the monogamous system as nuclear.

One of the other key aspects of polyamory that is openly discussed in the film, and related to the already mentioned idea of non-exclusivity, is the questioning of the idea that a single person is able to fulfil all of their partner's needs or desires, thus questioning the existence of a "better half." In *Professor Marston,* this is taken to a highly symbolic sphere through the design and construction of Wonder Woman as a fictional character who unites Olive and Elizabeth. The superheroine is so clearly influenced by the two women that her main weapon, the Lasso of Truth, forces her enemies to tell the truth when captured. Not only does this weapon hint at their research on the lie detector, but it also combines their scientific discoveries with their interest in bondage as part of their exploration of submission.

When first asked if being in love with two people at the same time could be even possible, William passionately tells his wife "[Olive] is beautiful, guileless, kind, pure of heart. And you are brilliant, ferocious, hilarious, and a grade-A bitch. Together you are the perfect woman" (00:36:06-00:36:32). By appreciating Olive's attributes without depreciating Elizabeth's, William embodies what is commonly known as "the abundance of love" (Hardy and Easton 1997; Nordgren 2012, among others), that maintains that expressing love for someone –romantically or otherwise– does not imply taking that amount of love from an already-loved one. Notwithstanding William's appreciation of both women's attributes, his use of passive and active language, respectively, can be interpreted as a veiled comparison or hierarchisation of the two of them in which Elizabeth is granted a higher, more active rank, as his wife and therefore longer relationship. William goes even further in his metaphor of the "perfect woman" when giving life to his comic heroine, who combines aspects from one of Olive's outfits, as well as an evident resemblance with her group of college friends, while adding Elizabeth's determination to "fight Nazis" (01:15:32). In his own words, "Wonder Woman is a love letter. She is a fantasy. She comes from a distant place where there is beauty, and justice, and respect. I write what I see about women I know, women who are every bit as just as strong, and capable as Wonder Woman. ... [She] stands for the truth" (01:41:20-01:41:57). Wonder Woman, in a way, is how William stays (publicly) loyal to his love for the two women representing them as a conjunction. At the same time, however, this "fantasy" suggests only a fictional woman could ever hold all the attributes that the superheroine is gifted with –both active and emotional ones– which can be taken as a depreciating stance.

However, contrary to William's will of celebration and openness, there are also undertones of fear and shame that intermittently linger over the three characters throughout the film, and that transcend the public sphere to infiltrate their intimacy. It is worth mentioning that their love is described by William himself as "illegal" (01:10:19), which is the same word used in the film for another two practices: alcohol and pornography. However, they are never shown conflicted by the idea of being caught in any of the other two spheres. Although Elizabeth argues that "what [they] do in the privacy of [their] home is [their] business" (01:10:20-01:10:23), it is her who in the end will give up on their love and their relationship in order to avoid

further backlash. While she argues she is only trying to protect their kids, William bitterly points out they are "inheriting [her] shame" (01:36:34-01:36:35). This reflection ultimately pushes her in her reconciliation with both Olive and William, but also with their "unconventional life" (00:40:29) and love.

4. "WHY THE ELABORATE CHARADE?": PERFORMATIVITY AS THE KEY FOR SURVIVAL

Both spheres –public and intimate– collide in the way in which the three characters are presented to the world. This portrayal has two differentiated levels: their own life, and Wonder Woman's life as a replica of the former. "What kind of a world do you think we're living in?," Elizabeth argues, and she goes on, "*We* cannot be in love. It's preposterous, it is a fantasy, and we have to live in reality. In this world and these lives love doesn't matter" (00:53:28-00:53:48). I argue that the superheroine functions in the film as a metaphor that, through William's vision and creation of this fantasy, articulates the difficulties they face and how the world around them conditions what they can show and what they are condemned to hide.

It is within the first ten running minutes when the epitome of performativity is brought to scene. Olive stops by the college theatre right after she has been attacked by Elizabeth's harshness warning her against any sexual advances she might attempt towards William. On stage, some students are shown rehearsing for a play, in which Diana "the fairest of all the virgins," "Diana the pure" (00:09:37-00:09:46) is the protagonist. Olive is visibly conflicted with ideas of beauty and purity and what they mean for her –pure but denied of that purity because of her beauty and the alleged threat it poses. However, that same space is revisited later, after the three of them have started reconciling their mutual feelings, and they first kiss in the empty theatre. The space that was before devoted to purity is transformed into a playful space of subversion that they reclaim in their first intimate encounter, not on stage, but in the backstage. However subtle, the difference made between what can be brought to stage –that is, purity and normativity– and what they are forced to keep behind the curtain is more than telling. Moreover, the scene is embellished by their use of theatre props, which serve as a disguise. By opting for the use of disguises, the characters metaphorically settle for an altered version of themselves as a way of gaining some distance from their true selves. At the same time, this emotional gap functions as a shield that protects them from the judgemental outside world.

Their only way of existing in the society in which their lives unfold is to keep their intimacy as a secret, so they have to "make up an explanation, a lie, and stick to it" (00:58:01-00:58:10), which they manage to do for over a decade. While William and Elizabeth do keep a certain degree of normative privilege as a married couple with two kids, Olive justifies that she is living with them and her own two kids under the pretext of being a widow, kindly taken in by the Marstons. However suitable for them to live together, this lie affects the portrayal they convey –only as close friends– and pushes their relationship to the background and the safe space of their home. This decision, I argue, complies with the usual queer forced "choice"

not to bring any discomfort to others that might not approve of the object of their happiness, as posed by Sara Ahmed (2009, 2010, 2014). Such happiness, in the case of *Professor Marston,* is relegated even when shared with their kids and kept only for their back garden, never even the front one, where the seven of them can finally stop pretending and are shown as a close, loving family.

To some extent, the performative journey that the three characters go through lies in their experience with bondage practices. This forbidden subculture in which they find themselves involved almost by chance offers another dimension to the idea of hiding and behaving according to the established normativity –sexual, in this case. Elizabeth is at first the most reticent to even try it out, but soon after she reluctantly accepts to tie Olive up her doubts disappear into thin air. In a moving speech, their instructor offers a powerful simile between bondage and the outside world that perfectly embodies their conflicts when displaying affection: "They ask me why the rope, the costume, the roleplay. I tell them we play roles all the time in everyday life, constantly. Out there we are bound by much stronger chains than the ones we use in here" (01:06:26-01:06:47). By surrendering to this controlled and supervised practice, they are also choosing which ties they want to live with, as opposed to those they are forced to accept in public.

Ultimately, probably the most evident sphere of performativity in the film is embodied in the mere existence of Wonder Woman, which, as already mentioned, is based on the two female protagonists. The film's narrative is structured in two different timelines: the chronologic story of the triad relationship on the one hand, and the interview for the investigation William is being subject to, on the other. The latter offers a comprehensive view of the ultimate act of performativity through Wonder Woman as a fictional character in which their lives are reflected one way or another. William's entire interrogation serves as his own account of why they have chosen the life they share, while simultaneously positioning his interviewer as the reason why they must hide all those choices within a comic series. Aside from the most relevant subject of the interview, which is supposed to be the threat to a "decent" role model that the comics pose for children, the Head of the Child Study Association of America is particularly insistent when it comes to Wonder Woman's double life. While she carries out her superheroine duties, she also works as a secretary for Steve Trevor, her love interest, under her human pseudonym, Diana Prince. When asked about this "elaborate charade" (01:00:29) William immediately explains that "she does it because she loves him, she does it so they can be together, she does it for love" (01:01:20-01:02:15). It is also for love that Elizabeth settles for a job as a secretary even if she "too good for this line of work" (00:56:59-00:57:00), only because it will bring money to their home. In the same scene, the interviewer frowns upon this secrecy and asks, "would you tell she was living a lie?," which he denies arguing, "Wonder Woman assumes an alter ego so she can go to work" (00:59:35-00:59:41), the same alter ego Elizabeth needs to embrace, leaving behind all of her career conquered milestones and her life as more than just a mother and wife.

As exemplified, Wonder Woman serves as a metaphor for how crucial it is for the characters to remain hidden in plain sight. Praised at the beginning for its originality and fresh perspective on heroes and heroines, the comic soon moves

towards rejection of the unknown and the subversive. The same way that Wonder Woman needs to hide her true self, the characters are forced to live part of their lives only in the fantasy realm of fiction. For both Wonder Woman and the triad, letting their secret be known would mean "everything would be lost" (01:02:25), just the way Olive, Elizabeth and William lose everything they love and care about the two times their relationship is revealed. William calls this "real" world they cannot step in "Man's World" (00:54:14) in his comics, always using a pseudonym –Charles Moulton– that also works for him as his secret identity.

5. CONCLUSION

Professor Marston and the Wonder Women offers a realistic view on polyamory that avoids both mockery and idealisation, thereby creating space for the normalisation of diverse relationship models. The film shows conflicts, negotiations, agreements and resolutions, but also periods of misunderstandings and arguments, which build up a set of coexistent realities only natural for human interaction. As I have argued, *Professor Marston* visibilises a true polyamorous relationship and all that it entails: from internalised phobia and rejection to the pressures of society on a personal and intimate issue; and its shows how the two of them intertwine in the portrayal of such relationship, or in the absence of its public representation. Political, geographical and historical contexts condition the extent to which non-hegemonic discourses and stories are accepted or otherwise oppressed, but privilege also plays an important role. As Hammers and Sheff (2011) point out, race, class and education are the three key elements that define privilege, and polyamory is not an exception: it is only because of these privileged spheres the three characters inhabit that they are allowed a certain level of freedom to explore their non-normative, non-conforming relationship. Would this be possible with a set of racialised, lowerclass, uneducated characters? Fiction is, I argue, in need of the exploration of such a conjecture to show possibilities for non-privileged audiences that struggle to see themselves reflected on such an oneiric setting, however oppressed or repudiated these three characters might be shown.

All things considered, I take *Professor Marston* as a great step towards the inclusion of non-monogamies as part of the possible narratives to be represented in fiction. While misconceptions about these relational styles make it harder for accurate and respectful cultural representations, sometimes the risk is not as harmful as the invisibilisation of identities that comes with the absolute lack of it. In Rudine Sims Bishop words, "when images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part" (1990, ix). Although Sims Bishop explicitly discusses children and literature, this is also true about all identities that find it hard to see themselves reflected in the cultural products that circulate for them to consume. *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women,* however far from performing this task flawlessly, opens the door

to conversations around the depiction of affective and relational possibilities which question monogamy as the only available option.

Reviews sent to the author: 05/06/2026
Revised paper accepted for publication: 10/07/2026

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